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# ALCHEMY

Science of the Cosmos,

Science of the Soul

TITUS BURCKHARDT



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ALCHEMY

The son of the Swiss sculptor Carl Burckhardt, Titus Burckhardt was born in 1908. His youth was devoted to studies in art, art history, and oriental languages and to journeys through North Africa and the Near East. In 1942, he became director of Urs Graf-Verlag, a publishing house specializing in facsimile editions of ancient manuscripts. He remained there until 1968. In addition to writing books in German, he has translated many important works from the Arabic. Of his own books, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, *Sacred Art in East and West*, and *Moorish Culture in Spain* have appeared in English.

TITUS BURCKHARDT

# ALCHEMY

SCIENCE OF THE COSMOS,  
SCIENCE OF THE SOUL

TRANSLATED FROM  
THE GERMAN BY  
WILLIAM STODDART



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Throughout the Western world, the realization is dawning that contemporary science, including psychology, provides nothing for man that can take the place of the struggle for self-knowledge, and that most of our present religions have cut themselves off from the energy in their original teachings. Thus a great many Westerners are now seeking out ancient and modern texts that consider human life within cosmic schemes more purposeful than the universe of modern science.

But the understanding of how to relate these writings to our own lives remains elusive. Even the most serious and best informed among us are not sure which ideas are important and which are unnecessary for a real inner search to begin. Therefore, out of this flood of esoteric, traditional, and mystical writings, the editor has chosen only material that bears on the aim of looking impartially and with fresh hope at the chaos we see within ourselves and in the world around us.

JACOB NEEDLEMAN

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## INTRODUCTION

From the 'century of enlightenment' up to and including our own times, it has been customary to regard alchemy as a primitive precursor of modern chemistry. As a result of this, almost all the scholars who have concerned themselves with its literature have had no cause to see in it anything other than the earliest stages of later chemical discoveries. This one-sided way of looking at alchemy has at least had the merit of causing a distinction to be made between its corpus of traditional craft experience – in the preparation of metals, colours, and glass – and the apparently irrational procedures which play a central part in alchemy as such. As this corpus of craft experience is known to be far from negligible, the alchemists' stubborn adherence to the chemically meaningless formulae of their *magisterium* could not fail to appear all the more peculiar. People readily came to the conclusion that an insatiable desire to make gold had persistently caused men to believe in a heap of fantastic prescriptions, which, rightly seen, were nothing more than a popular and superstitious application of the natural philosophy of the ancients; rather as if the alchemists had tried, partly by means of physical procedures and partly by means of magical conjurations, to lay direct hold on the Aristotelian *materia prima* – the 'ground' of all things.

It never seemed to strike anyone as in the least improbable that an 'art' of the kind alleged should, despite all its folly and deceptions, have implanted itself for centuries on end in the most diverse cultures of East and West. On the contrary, people were much more inclined to take the view that until a century or so ago all humanity had been dreaming a stupid dream, the awakening from which came only with our own times, as if the spiritual-

intellectual faculty of man – his power to distinguish real from unreal – were itself subject to some sort of biological evolution.

This way of looking at alchemy is contradicted by a certain principle of unity running through alchemy itself: descriptions of the 'great work' stemming from many cultures and many centuries evince, through an admitted multiplicity of symbols, certain unvarying basic features which are not to be explained empirically. In its essentials, Indian alchemy is the same as Western, and Chinese alchemy, though set in a completely different spiritual climate, can throw light on both. If alchemy were nothing but a sham, its form of expression would betray arbitrariness and folly at every turn; but in fact it can be seen to possess all the signs of a genuine 'tradition', that is to say, an organic and consistent – though not necessarily systematic – doctrine, and a clear-cut corpus of rules, laid down and persistently expounded by its adepts. Thus alchemy is neither a hybrid nor a haphazard product of human history, but on the contrary represents a profound possibility of the spirit and the soul.

This is also the view of the self-styled 'depth psychology' which purports to find in alchemical symbolism a confirmation of its own thesis of the 'collective unconscious'.<sup>1</sup> According to this view, the alchemist, in his dreamlike search, brings to the light of day certain contents of his own soul previously unknown to him, and thus, without consciously intending to do so, brings about a kind of reconciliation between his superficial, ego-bound, everyday consciousness and the unformed (but form-seeking) power of the 'collective unconscious'. This 'reconciliation'

<sup>1</sup> See: Herbert Silberer, *Probleme der Mystik und ihre Symbolik*, Vienna, 1914; C. G. Jung, *Psychologie und Alchemie*, Zurich, 1944 and 1952, and *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, Zurich, 1955 and 1957.

is supposed to give rise to an experience of inner fulfilment, which subjectively takes the place of the alleged alchemical magisterium. This view, like the foregoing, is based on the assumption that the alchemist's prime intention was to make gold. He was considered to be ensnared in a form of madness or self-deception, and because of this to think and act as one who is in a dream. This explanation possesses a certain plausibility, since in one way it comes near to the truth – if only to depart from it immediately! It is true that the spiritual reality, to which the alchemical work is a sort of initiation, is something of which the beginner is more or less unconscious. It is something hidden deep in the soul. Nevertheless, this 'secret depth' must not be confused with the chaos of the so-called 'collective unconscious' – in so far as this somewhat elastic concept has any precise meaning. The alchemists' 'fountain of youth' in no wise springs from an obscure psychic substratum; it flows from the same source as the Spirit. It is hidden from the alchemist at the beginning of his 'work', not because it is below but because it is above the level of his conscious mental processes.

The hypothesis of the psychologists evaporates as soon as one realizes that the true alchemists were never ensnared in any wish-fulfilling dream of making gold, and that they did not pursue their goal like sleepwalkers or by means of passive 'projections' of the unconscious contents of their souls! On the contrary, they followed a deliberate method, of which the metallurgical expression – the art of transmuting base metals into silver or gold – has admittedly misled many uninitiated enquirers, although in itself it is logical and, what is more, truly profound.

## THE ORIGIN OF WESTERN ALCHEMY

Alchemy has existed since at least the middle of the first millennium before Christ, and probably since prehistoric times. To the question: why should alchemy have existed for millennia in such widely separated civilizations as those of the Near East and Far East, the reply of most historians would be that man has repeatedly fallen to the temptation to get rich quickly by seeking to make gold and silver from the common metals, until the empirical chemistry of the eighteenth century finally proved to him that metals could not be changed into one another. In actual fact, however, the truth is quite different, and, in part at least, exactly the opposite.

Gold and silver were already sacred metals, even before they became the measure of all commercial transactions. They are the earthly reflections of sun and moon, and thus also of all the realities of spirit and soul which are related to the heavenly pair. Until well into the Middle Ages the relative values of the two noble metals were determined by the relationship of the rotation times of the two heavenly bodies. Likewise, the oldest coins usually bear pictures or signs having some relation to the sun or its yearly rotation. For men of pre-rationalistic times the relationship between the noble metals and the two great luminaries was obvious, and a whole world of mechanistic notions and prejudices was necessary to obscure the self-evident reality of this relationship and make it look like a mere aesthetic accident.

One must not confuse a symbol with a mere allegory, nor try to see in it the expression of some misty and irrational collective instinct. True symbolism depends on the fact



that things, which may differ from one another in time, space, material nature, and many other limitative characteristics, can possess and exhibit the same essential quality. They thus appear as divers reflections, manifestations, or productions of the same reality – which in itself is independent of time and space. It is thus not quite right to say that gold represents the sun, and silver the moon; rather is it the case that the two noble metals and the two luminaries are both symbols of the same two cosmic or divine realities.<sup>1</sup>

The magic of gold thus springs from its sacred nature, or qualitative perfection, and only secondarily from its economic value. In view of the sacred nature of gold and silver, the obtaining of these two metals could only be a priestly activity, just as the minting of gold and silver coins was originally the prerogative of certain holy places only. In keeping with this is the fact that the metallurgical procedures relating to gold and silver which have been preserved in some so-called primitive societies from pre-historic times, reveal abundant signs of their sacerdotal origin.<sup>2</sup> In 'archaic' cultures, unacquainted as yet with the dichotomy of 'spiritual' and 'practical', and seeing everything in relation to the inner unity of man and the cosmos, the preparation of ores is always carried out as a sacred procedure. As a rule it is the prerogative of a priestly caste, called to this activity by divine command. Where this is not so, as in the case of certain African tribes which have no metallurgical tradition of their own, the smelter or smith, as an unauthorized interloper into the sacred order of nature, falls under suspicion of engag-

<sup>1</sup> An excellent description of what a symbol means is to be found in the ethnological study by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, chapter entitled *The Problem of Symbols*. Oxford, at the Clarendon Press, 1956.

<sup>2</sup> See: Mircea Éliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, collection 'Homo sapiens', Paris, 1956.

ing in black magic.<sup>3</sup> What appears to modern man as superstition – and what, in part, only survives as a superstition – is in truth an inkling of the profound relationship between the natural order and the human soul. 'Primitive' man is well aware that the production of ores from the 'womb' of the earth and their violent purification by fire is somehow sinister, and fraught with dangerous possibilities, even if he does not have all the proofs with which the history of the metallurgical age has so abundantly provided us. For 'archaic' humanity – which does not artificially separate matter from spirit – the arrival of metallurgy was not simply an 'invention', but rather a 'revelation', for only a divine command could authorize mankind in respect of such an activity. From the very beginning, however, this revelation was very much a 'two-sided' one<sup>4</sup>; it demands an especial prudence on the part of him to whom it has been given. Just as the outward work of the metallurgist with ore and fire has something violent about it, so also the influences which bear back on the spirit and the soul – and which are inescapable in this calling – must be of a dangerous and two-sided nature. In particular, the extraction of the noble metals from impure ores by means of solvent and purifying agents such as mercury and antimony and in conjunction with fire, is inevitably carried out against the resistance of the darksome and chaotic forces of nature, just as the achievement of 'inward silver' or 'inward gold' – in their immutable purity and luminosity – demands the conquest of all the dark and irrational impulses of the soul.

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> 'We revealed iron, wherein is evil power and many uses for mankind . . .' (Koran, LVII, 25).

The following report, from the autobiography of a Senegalese, shows how, in certain African tribes, the working of gold has continued to be regarded as a sacred art right up to the present day.<sup>5</sup>

'... On a sign from my father the two apprentices started working the sheepskin bellows, which were situated on either side of the forge and connected to it by means of clay pipes... The flames in the forge shot up and seemed to come to life – an animated and evil genius.

'My father then grasped the smelting-pot with his long tongs, and placed it on the flames.

'All of a sudden all other work in the smithy was stilled, for during the time that gold is being smelted, and while it cools, it is forbidden to work either copper or aluminium in its proximity, in case even a particle of these base metals should enter the smelting-pot. Only steel may continue to be worked. But even those engaged on a task with steel would usually finish it quickly or lay it aside, in order to join the apprentices gathered round the forge...

'When my father felt that his movements were being impeded by the apprentices crowding round, he would silently motion them to stand back. Neither he nor anyone else would utter a word. No one dared speak, and even the minstrel was silent. The stillness was broken only by the wheezing of the bellows and the low hissing of the gold. But though my father said not a word, I knew that he spoke inwardly; I could see that from his lips which moved silently as he stirred the gold and the charcoal with a stick – which, as it caught fire, he had to keep replacing.

'What could he be saying inwardly? I cannot say for sure, as he never told me. Yet what could it be but an invocation? Did he not invoke the spirit of the fire and of the

gold, of the fire and of the wind – the wind which blew through the bellows, of the fire that was born of the wind, and of the gold that was wedded to the fire? Assuredly he summoned their help and entreated their friendship and communion; assuredly he invoked these spirits which are amongst the most important, and whose aid indeed is necessary for smelting.

'The process which took place before my eyes was only outwardly the smelting of gold. It was something more besides: a magical process which the spirits could favour or hinder. That is why stillness reigned around my father...

'Was it not remarkable that at such a moment the little black snake always lay hidden under the sheepskin? For it was not always there. It did not come and visit my father every day, yet it never failed to appear when gold was being worked. This did not really surprise me. Ever since, one evening, my father told me of the spirit of our tribe, I had found it quite natural that the snake should be there, for the snake knew the future...

'The artisan who works the gold must first of all purify himself, must wash himself from head to foot, and, during the time of the work, must abstain from sexual intercourse...'

\*

That there is an inward gold, or rather, that gold has an inward as well as an outward reality, was only logical for the contemplative way of looking at things, which spontaneously recognized the same 'essence' in both gold and the sun. It is here, and nowhere else, that the root of alchemy lies. Alchemy traces its descent back to a priestly art of the ancient Egyptians; the alchemical tradition which spread all over Europe and the Near East, and

<sup>5</sup> Camara Laye, *L'Enfant noir*, Paris, 1953.

which perhaps even influenced Indian alchemy, recognizes as its founder Hermes Trismegistos, the 'thrice-great Hermes', who is identifiable with the ancient Egyptian God Thoth, the God who presides over all priestly arts and sciences, rather like Ganesha in Hinduism. The expression *alchemia* derives from the Arabic *al-kimiya* which is said to derive from the ancient Egyptian *kême* – a reference to the 'black earth' which was a designation of Egypt and which may also have been a symbol of the alchemists' *materia prima*. Another possibility is that the expression derives from the Greek *chyma* ('smelting' or 'casting'). At all events, the oldest extant alchemical drawings are on Egyptian papyri. That no early Egyptian documents remain is not surprising, since it is an essential feature of a sacred art that it is transmitted orally; that it should be committed to writing is usually a first sign of decadence, or of a fear that the oral tradition is going to be lost. Thus it is completely natural that the so-called *Corpus Hermeticum*, which comprises all the texts ascribed to Hermes-Thoth, has come down to us in Greek and clothed in a more or less Platonic language. That these texts are nevertheless descended from a genuine tradition, and are in no wise pseudo-archaic fabrications of the Greeks, is proved by their spiritual fruitfulness. The evidence suggests that the so-called 'Emerald Tablet' is also a part of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The Emerald Tablet declares itself to be a revelation from Hermes Trismegistos, and is regarded by alchemists writing in Arabic and Latin as nothing less than the 'table of law' of their art. There is no early text of the Emerald Tablet. It has come down to us only in Arabic and Latin translations – at least so far as has been determined up to now – but its contents bespeak its authenticity.

In favour of an Egyptian origin of Near-Eastern and

Western alchemy is the fact that a whole series of artisanal procedures, related to alchemy and furnishing it with many of its symbolic expressions, crop up as a coherent group, from late Egyptian times onwards, finally making an appearance in medieval prescription books. This corpus of procedures contains some elements clearly derivable from Egypt. Among these procedures, apart from the working of metal and the preparation of dyes, is the production of artificial precious stones and coloured glass, an art which blossomed nowhere more than in Egypt. Moreover, the whole of the Egyptian art of metals and minerals, in its efforts to extract the secret and precious essence from an earthy 'substance', shows an obvious spiritual relationship with alchemy.

Late Egyptian Alexandria was doubtless the melting-pot in which alchemy, along with other cosmological arts and sciences, received the form in which it is now known to us, without thereby being altered in any essential respect. It may well have been at that time also that alchemy acquired certain motifs from Greek and Asiatic mythologies. This must not be regarded as in any way an artificial happening. The growth of a genuine tradition resembles that of a crystal, which attracts homologous particles to itself, incorporating them according to its own laws of unity.

From this time onwards one can observe two currents in alchemy. One is predominantly artisanal in nature; the symbolism of an 'inward work' appears here as something superadded to a professional activity and is only mentioned occasionally and incidentally. The other makes use of metallurgical processes exclusively as analogies, so that one may even question whether they were ever employed 'outwardly'. This has caused some to make a distinction between artisanal alchemy – believed to be the older – and

a so-called mystical alchemy which is supposed to have developed later. In reality, however, it is a case of two aspects of one and the same tradition, of which the symbolical aspect is undoubtedly the more 'archaic'.

It will no doubt be asked how it was possible for alchemy, together with its mythological ground, to be incorporated into the monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The explanation of this is that the cosmological perspectives proper to alchemy, relating as they do both to the outward realm of metals (and of minerals in general) and to the inward realm of the soul, were organically bound up with ancient metallurgy, so that the cosmological background was taken over, along with the craft, simply as a science of nature (*physis*) in the broadest sense of the term, rather as Christianity and Islam appropriated the Pythagorean tradition in music and architecture, and assimilated the corresponding spiritual perspective.

From the Christian point of view, alchemy was like a natural mirror for the revealed truths: the philosophers' stone, which turned base metals into silver and gold, is a symbol of Christ, and its production from the 'non-burning fire' of sulphur and the 'steadfast water' of quicksilver resembles the birth of Christ-Emmanuel.

By its assimilation into Christian belief, alchemy was spiritually fecundated, while Christianity found in it a way which, through the contemplation of nature, led to a true 'gnosis'.

Even more easily did the Hermetic art enter into the spiritual world of Islam. The latter was always ready in principle to recognize any pre-Islamic art which appeared under the aspect 'wisdom' (*hikmah*) as a heritage of earlier prophets. Thus in the Islamic world Hermes Trismegistos is often identified with Enoch (Idrîs).

It was the doctrine of the 'oneness of existence' (*wahdat-*

*al-wujûd*) – the esoteric interpretation of the Islamic confession of faith – which gave to Hermetism a new spiritual axis, or, in other words, re-established its original spiritual horizon in all its fullness and freed it from the suffocation of late Hellenistic 'naturalism'.

Meanwhile the symbolism of alchemy, as a result of its gradual incorporation into late classical and Semitic thought, had developed into a variegated multiplicity. Nevertheless certain fundamental traits proper to alchemy as an 'art' remained as its infallible token throughout the centuries: above all the definite plan of the 'alchemical work', the individual phases of which are characterized by certain 'symbolical' processes which cannot always be carried out in practice.

In the first instance alchemy made its entry into Western Christendom through Byzantium, and later, and even more richly, through Arab-dominated Spain. It was in the Islamic world that alchemy reached its fullest flowering. Jâbir ibn Hayyân, a pupil of the sixth Shiite Imam Jafar aş-Sâdiq, founded in the eighth century A.D. a whole school, from which hundreds of alchemical texts flowed forth. No doubt it was because the name Jâbir had become the hallmark of much alchemical lore that the author of the *Summa Perfectionis*, a thirteenth-century Italian or Catalan, also assumed the name in its latinized form of Geber.

When, with the Renaissance, the great inrush of Greek philosophy occurred, a new wave of Byzantine alchemy reached the West. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries many alchemical works were printed, which until then had existed only as manuscripts and had circulated more or less secretly. As a result of this the study of Hermetism reached a new peak; it was soon, however, to enter into decadence.

The seventeenth century has often been regarded as marking the full flowering of European Hermetism. In reality, however, its decadence had already begun in the fifteenth century, and proceeded apace with the humanistic and already fundamentally rationalistic development of Western thought, by which any spiritual and intuitive universality of outlook was deprived of its very basis. It is true that for a certain time immediately preceding the modern age, elements of genuine gnosis, which had been squeezed out of the realm of theology both by the unilaterally sentimental development of later Christian mysticism, and by the agnostic trend inherent in the Reformation, found refuge in speculative alchemy. This undoubtedly explains phenomena such as the echoes of Hermetism to be detected in the works of Shakespeare, Jakob Boehme, and Georg Gichtel.

The medicine which derived from alchemy lived on longer than alchemy itself. Paracelsus called this 'spagyric' medicine. The term comes from the Greek words *σπαω* and *αγειρω*, 'divide' and 'unite' – corresponding to the alchemical *solve et coagula*.

In general, European alchemy following the Renaissance had a fragmented character; as a spiritual art, the metaphysical background was lacking. This is especially true of its last remnants in the eighteenth century – even despite the fact that, amongst all the 'charcoal burners', men of real genius such as Newton and Goethe concerned themselves with it – though unsuccessfully.

At this point it seems opportune to state categorically that there can be no 'freethinking' alchemy hostile to the Church, for the first prerequisite of every spiritual art is that it should recognize everything that the human condition, in its pre-eminence and in its precariousness, needs by way of means of salvation. That there was also a

pre-Christian alchemy in no wise proves the contrary; at all times alchemy was an organic part of a comprehensive tradition, which in some manner embraced all aspects of human existence. To the extent, however, that Christianity revealed truths which had been hidden to pre-Christian antiquity, these had to be taken into account by alchemy on pain of suicide. It is thus a major error to believe that alchemy or Hermetism by itself could possibly be a self-sufficient religion, or even a secret paganism. Any attitude of this sort would necessarily be so tinged with rationalism and humanism as to paralyse from the start any effort towards the inward *magisterium*. It is true that 'the Spirit bloweth where it listeth', and one cannot from the outside impose dogmatic bounds on its manifestation; but the Spirit certainly does not 'blow' where it itself – the Holy Ghost – is denied in any of its revelations.

In reality alchemy, which is not a religion by itself, requires to be confirmed by the revelation – with its means of grace – which is addressed to all men. This confirmation consists in the alchemical way and work being recognized by the alchemist himself as one particular means of access to the full meaning of the eternal and saving message of revelation.

We must dwell no longer on the history of alchemy, which in any case is not known in detail, no doubt largely because the handing on of an esoteric art usually takes place orally. One final point should, however, be mentioned; the fact that alchemical writings often bear fantastic names, out of all relation to chronology, allegedly as their authors or sources, in no wise militates against the worth of the texts in question; for, quite apart from the fact that the historical viewpoint and alchemical wisdom have nothing to do with one another, these names (as in

the case of the Latin Geber) are indications of a given 'chain' of tradition, rather than intended as signatures of authorship. The question as to whether a given Hermetical text is genuine or not, that is to say, whether it proceeds from true knowledge and experience of the Hermetic art or has merely been arbitrarily put together, cannot be determined either by philology or by a comparison with empirical chemistry; the only criterion is the spiritual unity of the tradition itself.

## CHAPTER 2

### NATURE AND LANGUAGE OF ALCHEMY

In my book on the principles and methods of sacred art<sup>1</sup> I more than once had occasion to refer to alchemy, by way of comparison, when considering artistic creation as it appears within a sacred tradition, not from the point of view of its outward aesthetic aspect, but as an inward process whose goal is the ripening, 'transmutation', or rebirth of the soul of the artist himself. Alchemy too was called an art – even the 'royal art' (*ars regia*) – by its masters, and, with its image of the transmutation of base metals into the noble metals gold and silver, serves as a highly evocative symbol of the inward process referred to. In fact alchemy may be called the art of the transmutations of the soul. In saying this I am not seeking to deny that alchemists also knew and practised metallurgical procedures such as the purification and alloying of metals; their real work, however, for which all these procedures were merely the outward supports or 'operational' symbols, was the transmutation of the soul. The testimony of the alchemists on this point is unanimous. For example, in *The Book of Seven Chapters*, which has been attributed to Hermes Trismegistos, the father of Near-Eastern and Western alchemy, we read: 'See, I have opened unto you what was hid: The [alchemical] work is with you and amongst you; in that it is to be found within you and is enduring; you will always have it present, wherever you are, on land or on sea . . .'<sup>2</sup> And in the famous dialogue between the Arab king Khalid and the

<sup>1</sup> *Sacred Art of East and West*, Perennial Books, London 1967.

<sup>2</sup> *Bibliothèque des philosophes chimiques*, published by G. Salmon, Paris, 1741.



sage Morienus (or Marianus) it is told how the king asked the sage where one could find the thing with which one could accomplish the Hermetic work. At this Morienus was silent, and it was only after much hesitation that he answered: 'O King, I declare the truth to you, that God in His mercy has created this extraordinary thing in yourself; wherever you may be, it is always in you, and cannot be separated from you . . .'<sup>3</sup>

From all this it will be seen that the difference between alchemy and any other sacred art is that in alchemy mastery is attained, not visibly on the outward artisanal plane as in architecture and painting, but only inwardly; for the transmutation of lead into gold which constitutes the alchemical work far exceeds the possibilities of artisanal skill. The miraculousness of this process, effecting a 'leap' which, according to the alchemists, nature by herself can only accomplish in an unforeseeably long time highlights the difference between corporeal possibilities and those of the soul. While a mineral substance, whose solutions, crystallizations, smeltings, and burnings can reflect up to a point the changes within the soul, must remain confined within definite limits, the soul, for its part, can overcome the corresponding 'psychic' limits, thanks to its meeting with the Spirit, which is bound by no form. Lead represents the chaotic, 'heavy', and sick condition of metal or of the inward man, while gold - 'congealed light' and 'earthy sun' - expresses the perfection of both metallic and human existence. According to the alchemists' way of looking at things, gold is the real goal of the metallic nature; all other metals are either preparatory steps or experiments to that end. Gold alone

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, II. The dialogue of the Arab king Khalid with the monk Morienus or Marianus was probably the first alchemical treatise to be translated from Arabic into Latin.

possesses in itself a harmonious equilibrium of all metallic properties, and therefore also possesses durability. 'Copper is restless until it becomes gold', said Meister Eckhart, referring in reality to the soul, which longs for its own eternal being. Thus, in contradistinction from the usual reproach against them, the alchemists did not seek, by means of secretly conserved formulas in which only they believed, to make gold from ordinary metals. Whoever really wished to attempt this belonged to the so-called 'charcoal burners' who, without any connection with the living alchemical tradition, and purely on the basis of a study of the texts which they could only understand in a literal sense, sought to achieve the 'great work'.

As a way which can lead man to a knowledge of his own eternal being, alchemy can be compared with mysticism. This is already indicated by the fact that alchemical expressions were adopted by Christian, and even more so by Islamic, mysticism. The alchemical symbols of perfection refer to the spiritual mastery of the human state, to the return to the centre or mean, to what the three monotheistic religions call the regaining of the earthly paradise. Nicolas Flamel (1330-1417), who as an alchemist has recourse to the language of his Christian faith, writes of the completion of the work, that it 'makes man good by effacing from him the root of all sins, namely covetousness, so that he becomes generous, mild, pious, believing, and God-fearing, however bad he may have been previously; because from now on he is continually filled with the great grace and mercy which he has received from God, and with the depth of His wonderful works'.<sup>4</sup>

The essence and aim of mysticism is union with God. Alchemy does not speak of this. What is related to the mystical way, however, is the alchemical aim to regain

<sup>4</sup> *Bibl. des phil. chim.*

the original 'nobility' of human nature and its symbolism; for union with God is possible only by virtue of that which, in spite of the incommensurable gulf between the creature and God, unites the former to the latter – and this is the 'theomorphism' of Adam, which was 'displaced' or rendered ineffective by the Fall. The purity of the symbol man must be regained, before the human form can be reassumed into its infinite and divine Archetype. Spiritually understood, the transmutation of lead into gold is nothing other than the regaining of the original nobility of human nature. Just as the inimitable quality of gold cannot be produced by the outward summation of metallic properties such as mass, hardness, colour, etc., so 'Adamic' perfection is no mere assemblage of virtues. It is as inimitable as gold, and the man who has 'realized' this perfection cannot be compared with others. Everything in him is 'original', in the sense that his being is fully awakened and united with its origin. As the realization of this state necessarily belongs to the mystical way, alchemy can in fact be regarded as a branch of mysticism.

And yet, the 'style' of alchemy is so different from that of mysticism, which is directly based on a religious faith, that some have been tempted to call it a 'mysticism without God'. This expression, however, is perfectly inept, not to say completely false, for alchemy presupposes a belief in God, and almost all its masters place great importance on the practice of prayer. The expression is true only to the extent that alchemy as such possesses no theological framework. Thus the theological perspective so characteristic of mysticism does not delimit the spiritual horizon of alchemy. Jewish, Christian, or Islamic mysticism is centred on the contemplation of a revealed truth, an aspect of God, or an 'idea' in the deepest sense of the word; it is the spiritual realization of this idea. Alchemy, for its

part, is primarily neither theological (or metaphysical) nor ethical; it looks on the play of the powers of the soul from a purely cosmological point of view, and treats the soul as a 'substance' which has to be purified, dissolved, and crystallized anew. Alchemy acts like a science or art of nature, because for it all states of inward consciousness are but ways of the one and only 'Nature', which encompasses both the outward, visible and corporeal forms, and the inward and invisible forms of the soul.

For all that, alchemy is not without a contemplative aspect. It by no means consists of mere pragmatism void of spiritual insight. Its spiritual, and in a certain sense contemplative, nature resides directly in its concrete form, in the analogy between the mineral realm and that of the soul; for this similarity can only be perceived by a vision which can look on material things qualitatively – inwardly, in a certain sense – and which grasps the things of the soul 'materially' – that is to say objectively and concretely. In other words, alchemical cosmology is essentially a doctrine of being, an ontology. The metallurgical symbol is not merely a makeshift, an approximate description of inward processes; like every true symbol, it is a kind of revelation.

With its 'impersonal' way of looking at the world of the soul, alchemy stands in closer relation to the 'way of knowledge' (gnosis) than to the 'way of love'. For it is the prerogative of gnosis – in the true and not the heretical sense of the expression – to regard the 'I'-bound soul 'objectively', instead of merely experiencing it subjectively. This is why it was a mysticism founded on the 'way of knowledge' that on occasion used alchemical modes of expression, if in fact it did not actually assimilate the forms of alchemy with the degrees and modes of its own 'way'. The expression 'mysticism' comes from 'secret' or 'to



withdraw' (Greek *myein*); the essence of mysticism eludes a merely rational interpretation, and the same holds good in the case of alchemy.

Another reason why alchemical doctrine hides itself in riddles is because it is not meant for everyone. The 'royal art' presupposes a more than ordinary understanding, and also a certain cast of soul, failing which its practice may involve no small dangers for the soul. 'Is it not recognized', writes Artephius, a famous alchemist of the Middle Ages,<sup>5</sup> 'that ours is a cabbalistic<sup>6</sup> art? By this I mean that it is passed on orally, and is full of secrets. But you, poor deluded fellow, are you so simple as to believe that we would clearly and openly teach the greatest and most important of all secrets, with the result that you would take our words literally? I assure you in good faith (for I am not so jealous as other philosophers), that whoever would take literally what the other philosophers (that is, the other alchemists) have written, will lose himself in the recesses of a labyrinth from which he will never escape, for want of Ariadne's thread to keep him on the right path and bring him safely out . . .'<sup>7</sup> And Synesios,<sup>8</sup> who probably lived in the fourth century A.D., writes: 'The (true alchemists) only express themselves in symbols, metaphors, and similes, so that they can only be understood by saints, sages, and souls endowed with under-

<sup>5</sup> Artephius is perhaps the latinized name of an otherwise unknown Arab author. (See: E. von Lippmann, *Entstehung und Ausbreitung der Alchemie*, Berlin, 1919.) He must have lived before 1250.

<sup>6</sup> 'Cabbalistic' is understood here in the etymological sense of the word, that is, 'handed down orally'.

<sup>7</sup> *Bibl. des phil. chim.*

<sup>8</sup> It is disputed whether or not Synesios is to be identified with the Bishop of Cyrene of that name (379-415). The latter was a pupil of the Alexandrian woman Platonist Hypatia.

standing. For this reason they have observed in their works a certain way and a certain rule, of such a kind that the wise man may understand and, perhaps after some stumbling, attain to everything that is secretly described therein.'<sup>9</sup> Finally Geber, who resumes the whole of medieval alchemical science in his *Summa*, declares: 'One must not explain this art in obscure words only; on the other hand, one must not explain it so clearly that all may understand it. I therefore teach it in such a way that nothing will remain hidden to the wise man, even though it may strike mediocre minds as quite obscure; the foolish and the ignorant, for their part, will understand none of it at all . . .'<sup>10</sup> One may well be surprised that, in spite of these warnings, of which many more examples could be furnished, many people – especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – believed that by diligent study of the alchemical texts they would be able to find the means of making gold. It is true that alchemist authors often imply that they preserve the secret of alchemy only to prevent anyone unworthy acquiring a dangerous power. They thus made use of an unavoidable misunderstanding to keep unqualified persons at a distance. Yet they never spoke of the seemingly material aims of their art, without also mentioning the truth in the same breath. Whoever was motivated by worldly passion would automatically fail to grasp the essential in any explanation. Thus in the *Hermetic Triumph* it is written: 'The philosophers' stone (with which one can turn base metals into gold) grants long life and freedom from disease to the one who possesses it, and in its power brings more gold and silver than all the mightiest conquerors have between them. In addition, this treasure has an advantage above all others in this

<sup>9</sup> *Bibl. des phil.*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

life, namely, that whoever enjoys it will be perfectly happy – the very sight of it making him happy – and will never be assailed by the fear of losing it.’<sup>11</sup> The first sentence appears to confirm the outward interpretation of alchemy, whereas the second indicates as clearly as is deemed desirable, that the possession in question here is inward and spiritual. The same is to be found in the already mentioned *Book of Seven Chapters*: ‘With the help of Almighty God this [philosophers’] stone will free you and protect you from the severest illnesses; it will also guard you against sadness and trouble, and especially against whatever may be harmful to body and soul. It will lead you from darkness to light, from the desert to home, and from indigence to riches.’<sup>12</sup> The double meaning which is to be perceived in all these quotations is in keeping with the often expressed intention to teach the ‘wise’ and mislead the ‘foolish’.

Because the alchemical mode of expression, with all its ‘hermetical’ taciturnity, is no arbitrary invention, but something entirely authentic, Geber was able to say, in an appendix to his famous *Summa*: ‘Whenever I have seemed to speak most clearly and openly about our science, I have in reality expressed myself most obscurely and have hidden the object of my discourse most fully. And yet in spite of all that, I have never clothed the alchemical work in allegories or riddles, but have dealt with it in clear and intelligible words and have described it honestly, just as I know it to be and have myself learnt it by divine inspiration . . .’ On the other hand, other alchemists have purposely composed their writings in such a way that the reading of them brings about the separation of the sheep from the goats. The last mentioned

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

work is an example of this, for Geber says in the same appendix: ‘I hereby declare that in this *Summa* I have not taught our science systematically, but have spread it out here and there in various chapters; for if I had presented it coherently and in logical order, the evil-minded, who might have misused it, would be able to learn it just as easily as people of good will . . .’ If one studies closely the seemingly metallurgically-intended expositions of Geber, one will discover, in the midst of the more or less artisanal descriptions of chemical procedures, remarkable leaps of thought: for example, the author, who has not previously mentioned a ‘substance’ (in connection with the ‘work’), will suddenly say: ‘Now take this substance, which you know well enough, and put it into the vessel . . .’ Or suddenly, after stressing at length that metals are not transmuted by outward means, he speaks of a ‘medicine that heals all sick metals’ by turning them into silver and gold. On each such occasion, mental understanding is rudely brought to a halt, and this indeed is the purpose of an exposition of this kind. The pupil is made to experience directly the limits of his reason (*ratio*), so that finally, as Geber says of himself, he may look within himself: ‘In turning back on myself and meditating on the way in which nature produces metals in the interior of the earth, I perceived that true substance which nature has prepared for us, so as to enable us to perfect them on earth . . .’ Here one will note a certain similarity with the method of Zen Buddhism, which seeks to transcend the limits of the mental faculty by concentrated meditation on certain paradoxes enunciated by a master.

That is the spiritual threshold which the alchemist has to cross. The ethical threshold, as we have seen, is the temptation to pursue the alchemical art only on account of gold. Alchemists constantly insist that the greatest

obstacle to their work is covetousness. This vice is for their art what pride is for the 'way of love' and what self-deception is for the 'way of knowledge'. Here covetousness is simply another name for egoism, for attachment to one's own limited ego in thrall to passion. On the other hand, the requirement that the pupil of Hermes must only seek to transmute elements in order to help the poor – or nature herself – in need, recalls the Buddhist vow to seek the highest enlightenment only with a view to the salvation of all creatures. Compassion alone delivers us from the artfulness of the ego, which in its every action seeks only to mirror itself.

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It might be objected, that my attempt to explain the meaning of alchemy is an infringement of the alchemists' prime requirement, namely, the need for reserve in this domain. To this it may be answered that it is in any case impossible to exhaust by mere words the meaning of the symbols which contain the key to the innermost secret of alchemy. What can to a large extent be explained are the cosmological doctrines fundamental to the alchemical art, its view on man and nature, and also its general mode of procedure. And even if one were able to interpret the whole of the Hermetical work, there would always be something left over which no written word can convey and which is indispensable for the perfection of the work. Like every sacred art in the true sense of the term (that is, like every 'method' which can lead to the realization of higher states of consciousness) alchemy depends on an initiation: the permission to undertake the work must normally be obtained from a master, and only in the rarest instances, when the chain from man to man has been broken, may it happen that the spiritual influence

leaps miraculously over the gap. In the conversation between King Khalid and Morienus it is said concerning this: 'The foundation of this art is that whoever wishes to pass it on must himself have received the teaching from a master . . . It is also necessary that the master should often have practised it in front of his pupil . . . For whoever knows well the order of this work and has experienced it himself, cannot be compared with one who has only sought it in books . . .'<sup>13</sup> And the alchemist Denis Zachaire<sup>14</sup> writes: 'Above all I should like it to be understood – in case one has not yet learned it – that this divine philosophy far exceeds purely human power; still less can we acquire it from books, unless God has introduced it into our hearts by the power of His Holy Spirit, or has taught us through the mouth of a living man . . .'<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> French alchemist of the Sixteenth century.

<sup>15</sup> *Bibl. des phil. chim.* 11.

## THE HERMETIC WISDOM

The perspective of Hermetism proceeds from the view that the universe (or macrocosm) and man (or the microcosm) correspond to one another as reflections; whatever there is in the one, must also in some manner be present in the other. This correspondence may best be understood by reducing it to the mutual relationship of subject and object, of knower and known. The world, as object, appears in the mirror of the human subject. Though these two poles may be distinguished theoretically, they nevertheless cannot be separated. Each one can only be conceived in relation to the other.

For the sake of clarity it is necessary to examine here the various meanings that may be given to the term 'subject'. If one says that man's view of the universe is 'subjective', this usually means that the view in question depends on man's particular position in space and time and on his more or less developed ability and knowledge; 'subjective' dependence is here that of the individual or of a temporally and spatially limited group of people. Human understanding, however, is not merely limited from case to case: it is specifically limited in itself, and in this sense there is no such thing as a purely objective knowledge of the world standing outside the sphere of the human subject. Neither the agreement of all possible individual observations nor the use of means which extend the reach of the senses can get beyond this sphere, which conditions both the world as a knowable object and man as a knowing being. The logical coherence of the world – that which makes its manifold appearances a more or less graspable whole – belongs just as much to the world as to

the unitary nature of the human subject. Nevertheless, in every knowledge, however much of it may be coloured by the individual or the species, there is something unconditional. Otherwise there would be no bridge from subject to object, from 'I' to 'thou', no truth and no unity behind the countless 'worlds' as seen by so many and so widely varying individuals. This unconditioned and immutable element, which is the source of the more or less hidden 'truth-content' in every piece of knowledge – and without which it would not be knowledge at all – is the pure Spirit or Intellect, which as knower and known is absolutely and indivisibly present in every being.

Of all beings in this world man is the most perfect reflection of the universal – and, as regards its origin, divine – Intellect, and in this respect he can be regarded as the mirror or total image of the cosmos.

Let us pause for a moment in order to consider the different realities which stand facing one another like mirrors: first and foremost there is the Universal Intellect or 'Transcendental Subject', whose object is not only the outward physical world, but also the inner world of the soul – as well as the reason; for the operations of the reason can be the object of knowledge, whereas the universal intellect is incapable of any 'objectivization' whatsoever. It is true that the Intellect has direct and immediate knowledge of itself, but this knowledge lies beyond the world of distinctions, so that, from the point of view of distinctive perception (divided as it is into object and subject), it seems non-existent. Rather different is the human subject, endowed as it is with the faculties of thought, imagination, and memory, and dependent on sensory perception, for the human subject has as object the whole corporeal world. It is from the Universal Intellect that the human subject derives its capacity for

knowing. Finally there is man himself, composed of spirit (or intellect), soul, and body, who is both part of the cosmos which is the object of his knowledge and who also, in virtue of his special rank (that is, his pre-eminently spiritual nature) appears as a small cosmos within the larger one, of which he is the counterpart, like a reflected image.

Thus, the traditional doctrine of the reciprocal correspondence of the cosmos and the human being is also founded on the idea of the unique and Transcendent Intellect, whose relationship to what is commonly called 'intellect' (namely reason alone) is like that of a source of light to its reflection in a restricted medium.<sup>1</sup> This idea, which is a link between cosmology (the science of the cosmos) and pure metaphysics<sup>2</sup> is by no means the special prerogative of Hermetism although it is expounded with particular clarity in the writings of Hermes Trismegistos, the 'thrice-great Hermes'.

In one of these writings it is said of the Intellect or Spirit: 'The Intellect (*nous*) derives from the substance (*ousia*) of God, in so far as one may speak of God having a substance<sup>3</sup>; of what nature this substance is, God alone can know exactly.<sup>4</sup> The Intellect is not a part of the substance of God, but radiates from the latter as light shines forth from the sun. In human beings, this Intellect is God . . .'<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Reason may be compared to a convex lens, which directs the light of the Intellect or Spirit in a particular direction and on a limited field.

<sup>2</sup> By 'metaphysics' is meant the doctrine of the uncreated. The greater part of Aristotle's 'metaphysics' is no more than cosmology. A characteristic of true metaphysics is its apophatic character.

<sup>3</sup> '*Ousia*' has been translated by 'substance' in accordance with scholastic usage. In reality it is a question here of the 'essence' of God.

<sup>4</sup> That is, the substance (or rather, essence) of God cannot be known by anything outside itself, because it is beyond all duality and all distinction between object and subject.

<sup>5</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum*, translated by A.-J. Festugière, Paris, 'Les Belles Lettres', 1945. Chapter entitled: 'D'Hermès Trismégiste: Sur l'intellect commun, à Tat.'

One must not let oneself be misled by the inevitable defectiveness of the simile here employed. When one speaks of the radiation or shining forth of the Intellect from its Divine Source one does not mean some sort of material emanation.

In the same book it is said that the soul (*psyche*) is present in the body in the same manner as the intellect (*nous*) is present in the soul, and as the Divine Word (*Logos*) is present in the intellect. (It can also be said, the other way round, that the body is in the soul as the soul is in the spirit or intellect, and the spirit in the Word.) God is called the Father of all.

It will be seen how close this doctrine is to that of Johanne theology – a fact which explains how Christian circles in the Middle Ages were able to see in the writings of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (as in those of Plato) the pre-Christian 'seeds' of the Logos.<sup>6</sup>

Although the doctrine of the transcendent unity of the Intellect is affirmed by all revealed scriptures, it nevertheless remains esoteric in that it cannot be transmitted to everyone without the risk of a misleading simplification. The chief danger is that, in its effort to comprehend, the imagination may conceive of the unity of the Spirit or Intellect, as a sort of material unity. This would lead to the obscuring of the distinction between God and creation, as well as of the essential uniqueness of each individual creature.

The Universal Intellect is not one numerically, but one in its indivisibility. In this way it is wholly present in each creature, and from it each creature derives its uniqueness, for there is nothing which possesses more unity, wholeness, and perfection than that through which it is known.

<sup>6</sup> St Albert the Great, amongst others, looked on the hermetic writings in this way.

An example of a false view concerning the one Intellect present in all beings is provided by the philosophical opinion that, when the individual spiritual being leaves the body at the time of death, it immediately returns to the Universal Intellect, so that there is no separate survival after death. However, that which, in this life, confers an 'ego-ic' limitation on the infinite light of the Intellect, is not the body, but the soul. Now the soul survives after separation from the body, even when, in this life, it was entirely orientated towards the body and indeed appeared to have no other content than this.<sup>7</sup>

Since the Intellect, as the cognitive pole of universal existence, is not accessible to discursive knowledge, knowledge of it will not change the experience of the world – at least not in the realm of facts. Essential knowledge does, however, determine the inward assimilation of this experience, i.e., the grasping of its truth. For modern science 'truths' (or general laws) – without which mere experience would be no more than shifting sand – are only simplifying descriptions of appearances, useful but always provisional 'abstractions'. For traditional science, on the other hand, truth is the expression or 'congelation' (in a form accessible to the reason) of a possibility contained in the Universal Intellect. And since this possibility is permanently and immutably contained in the Intellect, it must also manifest itself in the outward world. The idea of truth is thus much more absolute in traditional than in modern science – without, nevertheless, the conceptual forms of truth ever becoming an end in themselves, since the reason's and the imagination's grasp of truth is no more than a symbol of the possibilities contained in the eternal Intellect.

<sup>7</sup> This is the reason for the agonies suffered by souls that have been wholly orientated towards the body, when they leave the body.

According to the modern point of view science is built up exclusively on the basis of experience. From the traditional point of view, experience is nothing without that core of truth which comes from the Intellect, and around which individual experiences can crystallize. Thus Hermetic science is based on certain traditional symbols which derive from a spiritual revelation. The expression 'revelation' is used here in a somewhat wider sense than that usually given to it by theology, but is not intended in a purely poetic sense. In Hindu terms, the spiritual process in question would be regarded as a revelation 'of second rank', that is to say, as *smriti* rather than *shruti*. In Christian terms, one would speak of an inspiration of the Holy Spirit, intended not for the whole community of the faithful but only for certain people capable of a particular mode and degree of contemplation. It was in this way, at any rate, that Christian alchemists regarded the heritage of Hermetism. Hermetism is in fact a branch of the primordial revelation which, having persisted throughout all ages, extends also into the Christian and Islamic worlds.

The immutable possibilities contained in the Intellect cannot be grasped immediately by the reason. Plato called these possibilities ideas or archetypes, and one would do well to preserve the true meaning of these expressions, and not apply them to mere generalizations – which at best are no more than reflections of true ideas – nor to the purely psychological realm known as the 'collective unconscious'. The latter misuse is especially misleading since it involves a confusion of the indivisibility of the Intellect with the impenetrability of the passive and darksome depths of the soul. The archetypes are to be found not below, but above the level of reason, and so it is that whatever the reason can discern regarding



them is never more than a severely restricted aspect of what they really are in themselves. Only in the 'one-ing' of the soul with the Spirit – or its return into the undivided unity of the Spirit – does a certain reflection of the eternal possibilities in the formal consciousness take place. The contents of the Intellect, which is, as it were, the 'faculty' of the Spirit, thus suddenly 'congeal', in the form of symbols, in the reason and the imagination.

In the book of the *Corpus Hermeticum* known as 'Poimandres' it is described how the Universal Intellect revealed itself to Hermes-Thoth: '... With these words, He looked me long in the face, so that I trembled before his gaze. Then, as He raised His head again, I saw how in my own spirit (*nous*) the light which consists of a numberless number of possibilities, became an infinite All, while the fire, surrounded and so contained by an almighty power, had attained its immobile position: such is what I was able to grasp rationally of this vision ... While I was so completely out of myself, He spoke again: thou hast now, in the intellect (*nous*), seen the prototype, the origin, and the never-ending beginning ...'<sup>8</sup>

A symbol is whatever, on the planes of the soul and the body, reproduces spiritual prototypes. In connection with this reflection of higher realities on lower planes, the imagination possesses a certain advantage over abstract thought. In the first place, it is capable of multiple interpretation; furthermore, it is not so schematic as abstract thought, and also, in so far as it 'condenses' itself into a pure image, it relies on the inverse correspondence that exists between the corporeal and spiritual realms, according to the law that 'whatever is below resembles that which is above', as the 'Emerald Tablet' puts it.

<sup>8</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum*, op. cit., chapter on Poimandres.

In so far as the human intellect, as a result of a more or less complete union with the Universal Intellect, turns away from the multiplicity of things and so to say ascends towards undivided unity, so the knowledge of nature which a man obtains from such an insight cannot be of a purely rational or discursive kind. For him the world has now become as if transparent: in its appearances he sees the reflection of eternal 'prototypes'. And even when this insight is not immediately present, the symbols which spring from it nevertheless arouse the memory or 'recollection' of these prototypes. Such is the Hermetic view of nature.

What is decisive for such a view is not the measurable and enumerable nature of things, conditioned as it is by temporal causes and circumstances; rather is it their essential qualities, which one can imagine as the vertical threads (warp) of a woven material, taken as representing the world, round which the shuttle alternately winds the horizontal thread (woof), thus making the woven material a unitary and compact material. The vertical threads are the immutable contents or 'essences' of things, while the horizontal threads represent their 'substantial' nature, dominated by time, space, and similar conditions.<sup>9</sup>

From this comparison one can see how a vision of the cosmos based on spiritual tradition in a 'vertical' sense can be right, even although it may appear inexact in a 'horizontal', sense – that is to say in the sense of discursive and analytical observation. Thus, for example, it is not necessary to know every existing metal in order to know directly the prototype of metal in itself. It is enough to take into consideration the seven metals mentioned by tradition – gold, silver, copper, tin, iron, lead, and quicksilver – in order to understand the possible range of

<sup>9</sup> On the symbolism of woven material, see René Guénon, *The Symbolism of The Cross*, chapter XIV, Luzac, London, 1958.

variation within the one type. (We are only concerned here with the qualitative aspect of metal.) It is the same as regards the knowledge of the four elements,<sup>10</sup> which in alchemy play such a major role. These elements are not the chemical constituents of things, but are the qualitative determinants of 'matter' as such, so that, instead of speaking of earth, water, air, and fire, one can also speak of matter's solid, liquid, aerial, or igneous mode of existence. The analytical evidence, that water consists of two parts of hydrogen and one part of oxygen, tells us absolutely nothing about the essence of the element water. On the contrary, this fact, which can only be known circumstantially and so to say abstractly, actually obscures the essential quality 'water'. Furthermore the scientific approach strictly limits the reality in question to one given plane, whereas the immediate and symbolical intuition of the element awakens an echo which resounds through all levels of consciousness, from the corporeal to the spiritual.

Modern science 'dissects' things, with a view to possessing and mastering them on their own level. Its aim is above all technology. Rationalism clung to the belief that by means of material and quantitative analysis it could discover the true nature of things. Characteristic of this point of view is Descartes' opinion that the scholastic definition of man as 'an animal endowed with reason' tells us nothing about man unless, by the study of his bones, tendons, tissues, etc., we know what the word 'man' really means.<sup>11</sup> As if a definition were not all the

<sup>10</sup> The Hindus speak of five elements, because they regard ether (*akasha*), the *quinta essentia* of the alchemists, as being also one of the elements.

<sup>11</sup> Descartes, *La Recherche de la vérité par les lumières naturelles*, mentioned in: Maurice Daumas, *Histoire de la science*, Encyclopédie de la Pléiade, p. 481.

nearer to the essential, the broader it is! Analytical understanding is ultimately nothing more than the knife which probes into the joints of things. By so doing, it permits a clearer view of these. But the essence is not accessible to mere dissection. Goethe understood this very well when he said that what nature did not reveal to us in the light of day, could not be forced out of her by 'levers and screws'.



The difference between traditional cosmology, such as Hermetic cosmology, and analytical science, dominated by reason alone, shows itself most clearly in their astronomical outlook. The oldest world-picture, in which the earth is seen as a disc covered by the starry vault of heaven, is fraught with the most general and profound meanings – meanings which are all the less obsolete in that this world-picture remains true, being none other than the natural and immediate experience of all mankind. Heaven, by its movement the measurer of time, the determiner of day and night and the seasons, the cause of the rising and the setting of the luminaries, the dispenser of rain, manifests the active and masculine pole of existence. The earth, on the other hand, which under the influence of Heaven becomes pregnant, brings forth plants and nourishes all living creatures, corresponds to the passive and feminine pole. This relationship of Heaven and earth, of active and passive existence, is the prototype and exemplar of numerous analogous dualities, such as the conceptual pair 'essential form' (*eidos, forma*) and 'stuff' or 'substance' (*hyle, materia*) and the duality, understood in the Platonic sense, of spirit or intellect (*nous*) and soul (*psyche*).

The circular movement of the heavens implies the exist-



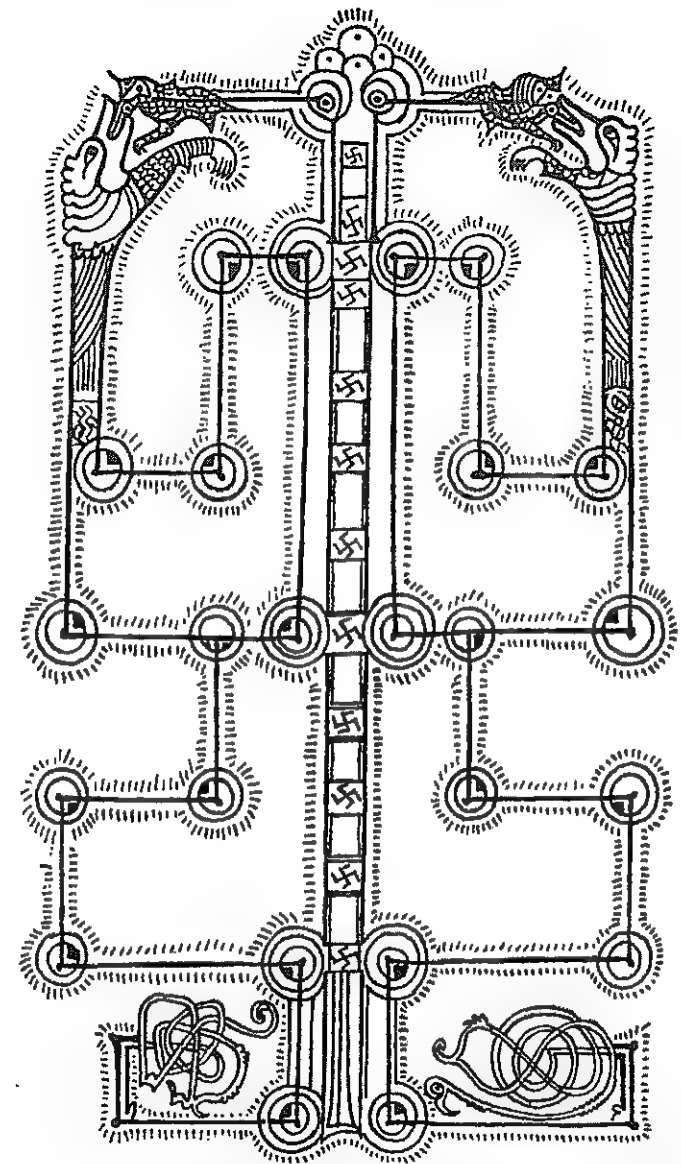
ence of a motionless and invisible axis, corresponding to the Intellect, which is immutably present in all circumstances of the world. Likewise the course of the sun traces a regular cross composed of the cardinal points – North and South, East and West – following which the cosmic qualities which govern all life distribute themselves respectively as cold and warm, dry and humid. We shall see later how this order is repeated within the microcosm of the human soul.

The sun's course, in so far as it appears above the horizon, follows an increasingly wide circle from the winter solstice to the summer solstice, and then an increasingly narrow circle until the full year comes round. Basically this corresponds to an 'unwinding', spiral which, after so many turns, becomes a 'winding-up', spiral – an image which has been portrayed in a variety of signs, such as the double spiral,



the twofold spiral vortex, familiar as the Chinese *yin-yang*, and not least in the staff of Hermes (the *caduceus*) in which two snakes are entwined on an axis – the world axis.<sup>12</sup> The opposition made manifest in the two phases of the sun's course (the ascending and the descending) corresponds in a certain sense to the opposition between heaven and earth – with this difference, that here both sides are mobile, so that, instead of an opposition of causes, it is a question of an alternation of forces. Heaven and earth are above and below; the two solstices are south and north; they are related to one another as are expansion and contraction. We shall again come across this opposi-

<sup>12</sup> In this connection see: René Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, chapter XXV, and Julius Schwabe, *Archetyp und Tierkreis*, Basel, 1951.



*An Irish or Anglo-Saxon form of the two dragons on the world-tree. The swastika on the trunk of the tree (which corresponds to the world axis) represents the movement of the heavens. Each dragon is composed of twelve suns or stars, which could correspond to the twelve months.*

*From an eighth-century miniature from the 'Pauline Letters from Northumberland' in Würzburg University Library.*

tion, which has many meanings, in connection with the alchemical magisterium, where it appears as the opposition between sulphur and mercury.

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The Ptolemaic world-picture (in which the earth as a globe represents the centre, around which the planets revolve in a variety of orbits or spheres, surrounded by the heaven of fixed stars and, at the outside, by the Empyrean devoid of all stars) does not take away the meaning of the earlier world-picture any more than it takes away mankind's immediate experience of it. It brings, moreover, into play a different symbolism, namely that of the all-comprehending character of space. The gradation of heavenly spheres reflects the ontological order of the world, according to which each degree of existence proceeds from a higher one, in such a way that the higher degree 'contains' the lower one, just as a cause 'contains' its effect. Thus the wider the heavenly sphere in which a star moves, the purer, the less conditioned, and the nearer to the divine origin is the degree of existence or the level of consciousness which corresponds to it. The starless Empyrean, which surrounds the starry heavens and which seems to impart to the firmament of fixed stars (the fastest and most regularly revolving of all the spheres) its movement, represents the prime mover (*primum mobile*), and so also the all-embracing Divine Intellect.

This was the interpretation of the Ptolemaic world-picture adopted by Dante. Before his time it was already to be found in Arab writings. There is also an anonymous Hermetical manuscript of the twelfth century, written in Latin and probably of Catalan origin,<sup>13</sup> in which the

<sup>13</sup> Published by M. T. d'Alverny, *Les Pérégrinations de l'âme dans l'autre*

spiritual meaning of the heavenly spheres successively surrounding one another is presented in a manner reminiscent of the Divine Comedy. The ascent through the spheres is described as an ascent through a hierarchy of spiritual (or intellectual) degrees, by means of which the soul, which successively realizes these, gradually turns from a discursive knowledge bound to forms to an undifferentiated and immediate vision in which subject and object, knower and known, are one. This description is illustrated by drawings which show the heavenly spheres as concentric circles, through which men ascend, as if on Jacob's ladder, to the highest sphere, the Empyrean, on which Christ sits enthroned.<sup>14</sup> The heavenly circles are complemented in a downward direction – that is, towards the earth – by the elements. Next to the lunar sphere is the circle of fire; under this is the circle of air, which encloses water, which immediately surrounds the earth. It is noteworthy that this anonymous manuscript, the Hermetic character of which is evident, recognizes the validity of all three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This clearly demonstrates how the Hermetic science, thanks to its purely cosmological symbolic language based on nature, can be combined with every genuine religion without conflict with the respective dogmas.

As the revolution of the eighth heaven, the firmament of fixed stars, is the basic measure of time, so the outermost starless heaven (which imparts to the eighth its slightly behind-hand movement, delayed by the so-called pro-

*monde d'après un anonyme de la fin du XIIe siècle* in *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge*, 1940-1942. According to M. T. d'Alverny's latest research the manuscript housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris was probably written in Bologna on the basis of a Spanish forerunner.

<sup>14</sup> See Plates 1 and 2 and the respective explanations on pp. 48-50.

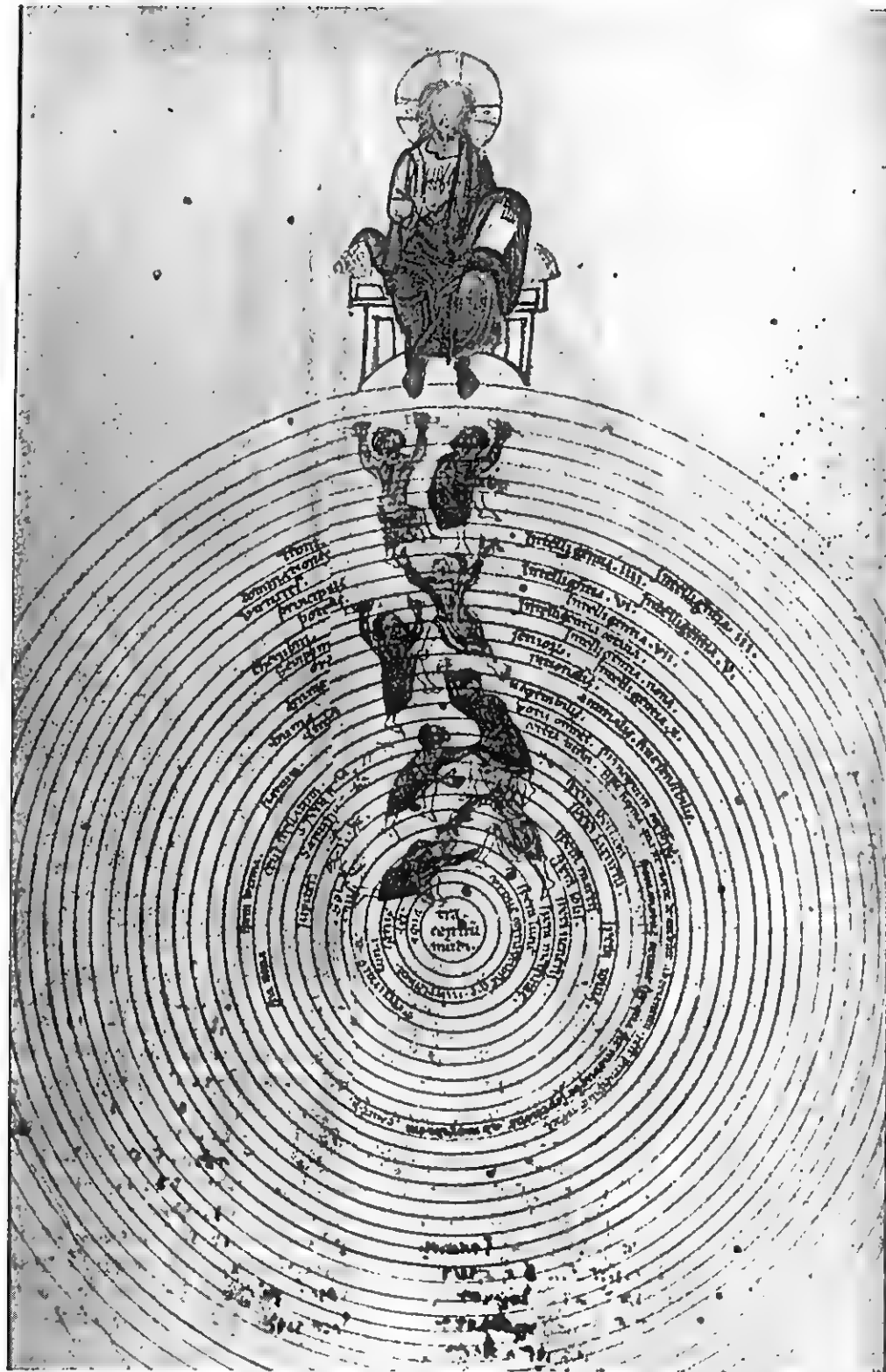
cession of the equinoxes) must represent the border-line between time and eternity or between all the more or less conditioned modes of duration<sup>15</sup> and the eternal 'now'. The soul, which is represented as ascending through the spheres, will thus, once it reaches the Empyrean, leave behind the world of multiplicity and of mutually exclusive forms and conditions, and reach undivided, but all-

<sup>15</sup> According to Averroes the unbroken movement of the starless heaven is the mediator between time and eternity.

Plates 1 and 2 THE ASCENT OF THE SOUL THROUGH THE SPHERES. Two analogous representations from an anonymous Hermetic manuscript of the end of the twelfth century (MS Latin 3236A of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris; first published by M. T. d'Alverny in Archives d'Histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age, 1940-42).

Folio 90 shows at the top the enthroned Christ above the spheres. Alongside are the words: 'Creator omnium Deus – Causa prima – Voluntas divina – Voluntas divina' (The Creator of all things, God – the first Cause – the Divine Will – the Divine Will). The two uppermost circles contain the words 'forma in potentia' and 'materia in potentia'. These are the two poles forma and materia prima, Pure Act and Passive Receptacle, which are here conceived as possibilities contained in Pure Being, and not yet manifested. This is why they lie outside the Universal Spirit, when this is viewed in its manifested or created reality, which is represented by the next circle: 'Causatum primum esse creatum primum principium omnium creaturarum continens in se creaturas' (first effect, first created being, principle of all creatures, containing all creatures within itself). As stages within the Universal Spirit there follow ten intellectual or cognitive faculties ('intelligentiae'), to which correspond a similar number of angelic choirs. Curiously the order in which they appear is the exact opposite to that of the Dionysian





embracing, Being. Dante represents this crossing – which involves a complete reversal of viewpoint – by confronting the cosmic order of concentric spheres which widen successively from earthly limitation to Divine Infinity, with a reversed order, whose centre is God, around Whom the choirs of angels revolve, in ever widening circles. They revolve fastest where they are nearest the Divine origin – in contradistinction from the cosmic spheres, whose apparent movement grows in proportion to their distance from the earthly centre. – With this ‘up-turning’ of the

doctrine of the Heavenly Hierarchy; from above downwards they are: ‘Angeli’, ‘Archangeli’, ‘Troni’, ‘dominationes’, ‘virtutes’, ‘principatus’, ‘potestates’, ‘Cherubim’, ‘Seraphim’ and ‘ordo senorum’ (choir of elders). This reversal of order may be due to the error of a copyist who had a theocentric scheme in mind.

Beneath these ten spheres of the supra-formal Spirit lie four spheres of the soul: ‘Anima celestis’, ‘Anima rationabilis’, ‘Anima animalis’ and ‘Anima vegetabilis’.

So far the concentric order of the spheres is intended purely symbolically, whereas the succeeding (and ever smaller) spheres of the corporeal world are to be understood both symbolically and spatially: the corporeal world is surrounded by its outermost circle: ‘Natura principium corporis’ (Nature as principle of bodies). It contains the astronomic spheres, the outermost of which corresponds to the daily revolution of the heavens: ‘Sphaera decima – sphaera suprema qua fit motus de occidente ad orientem et est principium motus’ (tenth sphere – highest sphere, in which takes place the movement from West to East, and which is the principle of all movement). Inside this is the sphere which determines the precession of the equinoxes: ‘Sphaera nona – sphaera motus octave sphaera qua fit motus eius de septentrione ad meridiem et e converso’ (ninth sphere, which moves the eighth sphere and causes it to travel from

cosmic order into the Divine order Dante anticipated the deeper meaning of the heliocentric world-view.

■

The world-picture in which the sun represents the centre, around which all planets, including the earth, revolve, is not an original discovery of the Renaissance. Copernicus merely revived – and supported with observations

*North to South and vice versa). Then follow in descending order the heaven of fixed stars and the planetary spheres: 'Spera octava – spera stellata; Saturnus – spera saturni; Jupiter – spera iovis; Mars – spera martis; Sol – spera solis; Venus – spera veneris; Mercurius – spera mercurii; Luna – spera lunae.' Inside these lie the four elements in concentric circles around the centre of the earth (the outermost circle corresponds both to the domain of the elements as such, and to the highest element fire): 'Ignis – corpus corruptibilis quod est quatuor elementa' (Fire – corruptible body consisting of the four elements); 'aer'; 'acqua'; 'terra'; 'centrum mundi'.*

*Through these circles of the spiritual, psychic and corporeal worlds men rise to God as if on a ladder. The lowest figure is still bound to the domain of the elements and a companion is dragging him up from this by the hair. Alongside the uppermost group is written: 'O mi magist[er]' (O my Master?), alongside the next: '[e] phebei' ('youths'), alongside the middle group: 'socii omnes' (all companions), and alongside the lowest: 'cetera turba' (the remaining crowd). This is presumably a reference to different degrees of wisdom or initiation.*

*The other miniature, on folio 89, repeats the same order, this time with complete circles but with only partial inscriptions.*

– an idea which was already known to antiquity.<sup>16</sup> As a symbol, the heliocentric world-view is the necessary complement of the geocentric. For the divine origin of the world – that is to say the one Intellect or Spirit through whom God produces the world – can just as easily be thought of as the All-Embracing (corresponding to limitless space), as it can be thought of as the one 'radiating' Centre of all manifestation. Precisely because the Divine Origin is so high above all differentiation, each representation of it has to be complemented by its own inverted counterpart, as if seen in a mirror.

The heliocentric world-view, however, was in fact used by rationalism to prove that the traditional geocentric world-view – and all the spiritual interpretations connected with it – were pure deception. And from this arose the paradox that a philosophy which made of human reason the measure of all reality, resulted in an astronomical world-view in which man was to appear more and more like a speck of dust amongst other specks of dust, a mere accident without any sort of cosmic precedence, while the medieval perspective, based not on human reason but on revelation and inspiration, had placed man at the centre of the cosmos. This blatant contradiction is nevertheless simple to explain. The rationalistic view forgets completely that everything which it may express concerning the universe, remains a content of human consciousness, and

<sup>16</sup> The heliocentric system was already taught by Aristarchos of Samos (ca. 320-250 B.C.). Nicholas Copernicus, in the preface to his work *On the Courses of the Heavenly Bodies* addressed to Pope Paul III, refers to Hicetas of Syracuse and to certain indications by Plutarch. In his book on the heavens Aristotle writes: 'Whereas most (learned men) believe that the earth is the centre (of the world), the Italic philosophers, the so-called Pythagoreans, are of the opposite view; for they assert that in the centre there is fire. The earth on the other hand, which is one of the stars, moves in a circle round the centre . . .' Probably certain Indian astronomers of antiquity were also familiar with the heliocentric view.

that man, precisely because he can look at his physical existence from a higher point of view – as if he were not, in fact, bound to this earth – clearly demonstrates that he is the cognitive centre of the world. Precisely because man is the privileged bearer of the Intellect, and therefore may know essentially all that is, the traditional perspective places him at the centre of the visible world, which position, in fact, entirely corresponds with immediate sensory experience. In the same view, namely that of traditional cosmology, the heliocentric world-picture, in which man is, so to say, peripheral to the sun, can only have an esoteric meaning, namely that which Dante has in mind in his 'theocentric' description of the angelic world: from the point of view of God man is not in the centre, but on the outermost border of existence.

That the heliocentric viewpoint should seem more correct from the physical-mathematical point of view is an indication that this point of view itself has something not quite human about it . . . It refuses to consider man as a whole, as a being composed of spirit (intellect), soul, and body, in favour of an exclusive consideration of the material-quantitative plane, and so becomes the 'inferior' reflection of the viewpoint which sees man *sub specie aeternitatis*.

No world-picture can ever be absolutely right, for the reality which our observation takes cognizance of is conditioned, dependent, and endlessly multiple.

Belief in the heliocentric system as something absolute has created a tremendous vacuum: man has been robbed of his cosmic dignity, and having been made a meaningless speck of dust amongst all other specks of dust circling round the sun, has shown himself incapable of achieving a spiritually satisfying vision of things. Christian thought, centred on the incarnation of Christ, was ill prepared for

this. To be able to see man as a disappearing nothingness in cosmic space, and at the same time as the cognitive and symbolical centre of the latter, quite exceeds the capacity of the majority.

Latterly, with the consignment of the sun itself into the stream of countless millions of other suns (perhaps also surrounded by planets) with perhaps thousands and millions of light years between them, no world-picture, in any true sense of the term, is any longer possible. The 'construction' of the world is no longer imaginable, with the result that man loses his capacity to integrate himself into a meaningful whole. Such at least is the usual effect of the modern viewpoint on Westerners. The Buddhist way of seeing things, which has always regarded the world as shifting sand, may show a different response to the scientific thesis.

If scientific knowledge went hand in hand with a spiritual evaluation of appearances, one would be able to see, in the successive abandonment of all so to say closed systems, a proof that every vision of the world is no more than an image or reflection and as such is in no wise unconditional. For this world, the sun, which our unaided senses experience, is the sum total of light and the natural symbol of that divine origin which illumines all things and around which all things revolve. At the same time, however, it is merely a luminous body, and as such not unique, but one thing amongst others of the same kind.

This is not the place to show how each new world-picture is demanded, not so much by new scientific observations, as by the logical 'unilateralness' of the preceding one. This applies also to the latest conceptions of space. Medieval cosmology imagined the totality of space as an immeasurably great sphere spiritually encompassed by the outermost heavens. Rationalistic philosophy con-



sidered space to be infinite. Since, however, as conditioned extension, it may well be indefinite but is certainly not infinite, the next scientific step leads to a virtually unimaginable concept of a 'curved' space flowing back into itself!

The unconditional homogeneity of space and time is abandoned by the latest mathematics in favour of a constant relationship between space and time. If, however, space is that which contains all that is simultaneously observed, and time is that which constitutes the succession of observations, then automatically the fixed stars are no longer separated from us by so many light years, but are situated where visible and simultaneously existing space has its outermost limit. In the face of this paradox, let it merely be said that ultimately every 'scientific' world-picture is doomed to contradict itself, whereas the spiritual meaning which manifests itself in one way or another in all visible things and which reveals itself all the more convincingly, the more primordial and the more suited to man the world-picture is, undergoes no change of any kind. If we speak here of a meaning, we do not mean anything conceptual. We use the expression 'meaning', of necessity and after the example of traditional writings, to designate the immutable content of things, which only the intellect is capable of grasping.

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By means of the preceding observations on the astronomical world-picture, we have perhaps succeeded in showing that there are two mutually opposed ways of looking at the world, or nature in the widest sense of this word. The one, impelled by scientific curiosity, strives towards the inexhaustible multiplicity of appearances, and, to the extent that it accumulates experiences, becomes

itself multiple and dismembered. The other strives after the spiritual centre, which is at once the centre of men and of things, while supporting itself on the symbolical character of appearances, in order to presage and contemplate the realities immutably contained in the Divine Intellect. The latter point of view leads to simplification, not with regard to what it perceives as a multiple gradation, but with regard to what it deems to be essential. The most perfect vision which man can achieve is simple, in the sense that its inward richness is devoid of differentiated characteristics. This highest vision or contemplation is referred to in a Syriac Hermetical text, from which we should like to quote a few extracts as a conclusion to this chapter on Hermetical wisdom. (The text in question speaks of a secret mirror, which is set up behind seven doors, which correspond to the seven planetary spheres): '... The mirror was so made that no man could see himself materially in it, for as soon as he turned away from it, he forgot his own image. The mirror represents the Divine Intellect. When the soul looks at itself in this, it discovers the shame that is in itself, and casts this away... Thus purified, it imitates the Holy Spirit, and takes Him as a model; it becomes Spirit itself; it achieves peace, and always returns to this higher state in which one knows (God) and is known by Him. Then, having become without a shadow, it is liberated from its own chains and from those which it shares with the body... What is the adage of the philosophers? - Know thyself! This refers to the intellectual and cognitive mirror. And what is this mirror if not the Divine and original Intellect? When a man looks at himself and sees himself in this, he turns away from everything that bears the name of gods or demons, and, by uniting himself with the Holy Spirit, becomes a perfect man. He sees God within himself... This mirror

is set up beyond seven doors . . . which correspond to the seven heavens, beyond the sensual world, beyond the twelve (heavenly) mansions . . . Beyond all this is this eye of the invisible senses, this eye of the Intellect which is omnipresent and beyond everything. There one sees this perfect Spirit, in Whose power all is contained . . .<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Berthelot, *La Chimie au moyen âge*, Paris, 1893. II, 262-263.

## CHAPTER 4

### SPIRIT AND MATTER

For the people of earlier ages, what we today call matter was not the same as for the people of today, either as regards the concept or the experience. This is not to say that the so-called primitive peoples of the world only saw through a veil of 'magical and compulsive imaginings' as certain ethnologists have supposed, or that their thinking was 'alogical' or 'pre-logical'. Stones were just as hard as today, fire was just as hot, and natural laws just as inexorable. Man always thought logically, even if, apart from sensory data and indeed through them, he was wont also to take into account realities of a different order. Logic belongs to the essence of man, and its decomposition into compulsive imaginings of partly materialistic, partly sentimental character is not to be found in 'primitive' peoples, nor even in the most spiritually degenerate savages, but only in the decadence of an exclusively town-based culture.

That matter should be conceived of as something completely cut off from spirit, as is the case in the modern world both in theory and in practice – and notwithstanding certain contradictory currents of philosophy<sup>1</sup> – is in no wise self-evident. It is the result of a particular mental development, to which Descartes was the first to give philosophical expression, without 'inventing' it; in fact it has been profoundly and organically conditioned by the general tendency to reduce spirit to mere thought and to limit it to discursive *ratio*, which means depriving it of

<sup>1</sup> Certain modern theories which seek to understand the development of inorganic and organic forms as a 'movement' of the Spirit, are basically nothing other than a continuation of materialism, since to the Spirit which in its essence is immutable they ascribe a 'becoming'.



all supra-mental significance, and therefore also of all cosmic presence or immanence.

According to Descartes spirit and matter are two completely separate realities, which thanks to divine ordination come together only at one point: the human brain. Thus the material world, known as 'matter', is automatically deprived of any spiritual content, while the spirit, for its part, becomes the abstract counterpart of the same purely material reality, for what it is in itself, above and beyond this, remains unspecified.

For men of earlier ages matter was like an aspect of God. In the cultures which are commonly called archaic, this perspective was immediate and linked with sensory experience, for the symbol of matter was the earth. The latter represented, in its perennial reality, the passive principle of all visible things, whereas heaven represented the active and generating principle. The two principles are like the two hands of God. They are related to one another as male and female, as father and mother, and cannot be separated from one another – for in whatever the earth produces Heaven is present as creative power, while the Earth, for its part, gives form and body to the heavenly law. Thus the archaic way of looking at things was 'sensible' and spiritual at one and the same time, for the metaphysical truth lying behind it remains independent of the simple world-picture in question.

For the *philosophia perennis*, which until the arrival of rationalism was common to both East and West, the two principles, the active and the passive, are, beyond all visible manifestation, the first and all-determining poles of existence. In this view, matter remains an aspect or function of God. It is not something separated from spirit, but its necessary complement. In itself it is no more than the potentiality of taking on form, and all perceptible

objects in it bear the stamp of its active counterpart, the Spirit or Word of God.

It is only for modern man that matter has become a thing and no longer the completely passive mirror of the Spirit. Matter has become more compact, so to say, in that it now claims for itself alone the quality of spatial extension, and everything connected with the latter. It has become inert mass, as opposed to the free Spirit. It is completely outward and spiritually impenetrable. It is mere fact. True, even for the people of earlier ages corporeal matter possessed this contingent and relatively unspiritual aspect, but this aspect did not make the same claim to sole reality. Above all, it was never regarded as something that could be studied on its own, independently of spirit. The view that spatial extension is the distinguishing characteristic of matter was first given philosophic expression by Descartes. From his time onwards, matter was regarded as mass and extension. The result of this was that men sought to understand all spatial, and finally all sensibly perceived qualities in a purely quantitative way. In a certain respect this is possible, namely, in so far as it may be of advantage in a science devoted exclusively to the outward manipulation of things. However, neither spatial extension, nor any other sensibly perceived quality can be fully exhausted along purely quantitative lines. As René Guénon showed in such a masterly way in his book *The Reign of Quantity* (Luzac, London, 1953), there is no spatial extension which does not have a qualitative – as well as a quantitative – aspect. One can see this most easily in the simplest spatial forms, such as the circle, the triangle, the square, etc. Each of these figures has something unique about it, qualitatively speaking, which cannot be subject to purely quantitative comparison.<sup>2</sup> It is,

<sup>2</sup> This is true even of numbers, in that each number does not simply

in fact, impossible to reduce the world of sense-perceptions to quantitative categories, for it would then disintegrate into pure nothingness! Even the simplest 'thought models' of empirical science – for example, the models indicating the structure of atoms or molecules – contain qualitative elements, or at least depend indirectly on such elements. One can express the difference between red and blue in figures by explaining the colours in terms of oscillations and expressing these in figures; but, a blind man, who has never had a direct experience of colours, will never know the essence of red and blue by virtue of these figures, and the same holds good for the qualitative content of every other sense perception. Let us imagine a man who has been deaf and colour-blind from birth, but has acquainted himself with the scientific account of sounds and colours. The scientific account will convey to him neither the essences of sounds and colours, nor the profound difference between the two kinds of sense perception. And what is true of the simplest and most elementary qualities, applies first and foremost to forms which are the expression of a living unity. These, by their very nature, elude not only all measurement and all counting, but also, and above all, any outlook that seeks to 'dissect'. It is always possible, of course, to chart, quantitatively, the frontiers of a particular form, without comprehending its essence. In the realm of art, no one would contest this, but it is frequently forgotten that this also holds good in all other domains. The essence, the content, the qualitative unity of a thing, can never be grasped by 'a step-by-step' process of measurement,

represent a quantity, but at the same time an aspect of unity, namely, duality, trinity, quaternity, etc. The qualitative difference between forms can be seen most simply in numerals, and this is why the Pythagorean doctrine looks on simple numerals as an expression of archetypes.

but only by a comprehensive and immediate experience or 'vision'.

The qualitative content of things does not belong to matter, which is merely a mirror for it, so that it can be seen, but not so that it can be altogether limited to the material plane. A science based on quantitative analysis, which 'thinks through action or acts through concepts' (rather than seeing and experiencing integrally and directly), must of necessity be blind to the infinitely fruitful and many-sided essence of things. For such a science, what the ancients called the 'form' of a thing (i.e., its qualitative content) plays virtually no role. This is the reason why science and art, which in the pre-rationalistic age were more or less synonymous, are now completely divorced from one another, and also why beauty, for modern science, offers not the smallest avenue towards knowledge.

The traditional doctrine which makes a distinction between *eidos* and *hyle* (or between *forma* and *materia*) is the one which most fully does justice to the fact that things have many meanings at different levels and that they have quality as well as quantity. The traditional doctrine, being truly discriminating, does not simply divide and break down, but takes account of the two 'poles' in their mutual complementarism. Aristotle gave dialectical expression to this doctrine, but he did not 'invent' it, for it lies in the nature of things, and corresponds to the spiritual outlook of primordial man.

Form, in the Peripatetic sense of the word, is the synthesis of the qualities which constitute the essence of a thing. Form signifies the intelligible reality of a thing, and is quite independent of the thing's material existence. One must therefore not confuse 'form' in this sense with 'form' in the everyday sense of something spatially or

otherwise limited, any more than one must equate 'matter', which receives 'form' and gives it finite existence, with 'matter' in the modern sense of the term.

The imagination may be helped to grasp the ideas of 'form' and 'matter' by the simile of the artist or artisan who imparts a certain form, preconceived in his intellect, to a material such as clay, wood, stone, or metal, thus creating a picture or other object. But this remains no more than a simile, because the artisan's material is not wholly 'formless'. Even if it is relatively 'unformed', it nevertheless already has certain properties or qualities – otherwise clay would not be distinguishable from wood, or stone from metal. Wholly 'formless' matter can neither be represented nor imagined, for it is a pure potentiality (that of taking on form) and has in itself no discernible characteristics whatsoever. It can only be known at all in its relationship with 'form'. Even form, however, cannot be represented as separate from matter, for every form which has been revealed already takes part in *materia*, and this applies also even for an imagined form, in so far as the imagination can be said to clothe the spiritual essence of the form with a kind of mental 'material'.

Because the essence of a form, irrespective of its material 'clothing', always remains the same (in such a way that one can still call a materially limited form 'form') the concept is possessed of a certain ambiguity. One must therefore be ready to recognize that in certain circumstances the same word 'form' can be given two opposite meanings: as the outward 'shape' of a being or a work, 'form', on the 'material' side of things, is opposed to the spirit or content. As the form-giving cause, however, which impresses its stamp on matter, 'form' takes its place on the other side – that of spirit or essence.

When we compare the Cartesian way of looking at

matter with this doctrine, we notice, amongst other things, that the spatial extension which Descartes ascribes to matter contradicts the traditional theory, for spatial extension devoid of any qualitative form is unimaginable. Even direction itself, as René Guénon has shown,<sup>3</sup> is of qualitative nature. Matter, however, is in itself altogether without form. All that it has is quantity, pure quantity undetermined by any finite number, which as such cannot be grasped in any way. It corresponds, as Guénon has also pointed out, to the *materia signata quantitate*, which the scholastics regarded as the basis of the corporeal world. That is to say, it does not correspond to *materia prima*, devoid as it is of every attribute, but only to the relative *materia secunda*, determined towards the corporeal world. Of *materia prima*, the primordial substance, one can only say that it is purely receptive with regard to the form-giving cause of existence and that at the same time it is the root of 'otherness', for it is through it that things are limited and multiple. In the language of the Bible, *materia prima* is represented by the waters, over which, at the beginning of creation, the Spirit of God moved.

Just as *materia*, when one seeks to grasp it, eludes every advance of the reason and retreats into the passive pole of existence, so the essential form (*forma*) may be traced back to the active pole of existence, by successively stripping it of every layer of manifestation that is conditioned by any *materia*, be it ever so fine. Aristotle, who traces back the two concepts (*forma* and *materia* or *eidos* and *hyle*) only so far as their ontology may still be demonstrated logically, does not reach the threshold where their opposition paradoxically dissolves into a higher unity. However, it is clear that the form-giving cause, corre-

<sup>3</sup> In *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, Luzac, London, 1953.

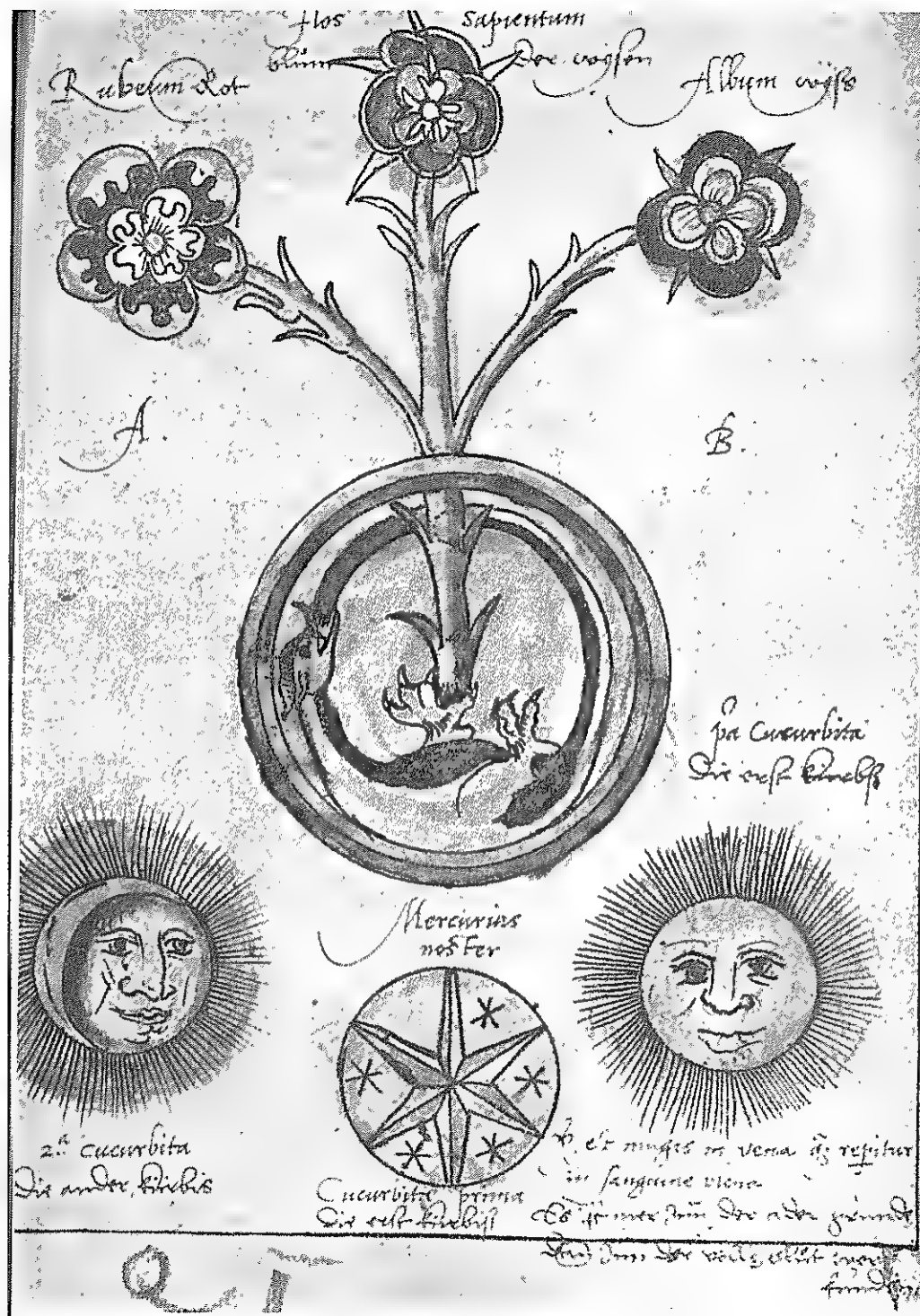
sponding to Pure Act, and the receptive substance, which is purely passive, complement one another reciprocally; and thus, as fundamental and timeless possibilities, they cannot be separated from one another. This reference of all appearances to two primary poles does not of course abolish the miraculousness of creation; it is merely a question of marking its outermost perceptible limits. The active pole can also be referred to in a general way

Plate 3 TWO CANDLESTICKS FROM THE GRAVE OF ST BERNWARD, bishop of Hildesheim (993-1022). St Bernward, the tutor of Otto III, the son of the Byzantine princess Theophano, founded, as bishop, workshops for metallurgy, goldsmithry, calligraphy and painting.

On the pedestals of the two candlesticks found in his grave there is written: *'Bernwardus Praesul candelabrum hoc puerum suum primo hujus Artis flore non auro, non argento, et tamen, ut cernis, conflare inebat'* (The Superior, Bernward, in the first blossoming of this art, ordered his apprentice to cast this candlestick neither in silver nor in gold, but nevertheless, as thou seest, to cast it). The two candlesticks consist of an alloy of silver with copper and iron; the surface shows signs of gilding.

The pedestal of both candlesticks consists of three pairs of entwined dragons on which naked men are riding. The vine tendrils around the shaft spring from the jaws of a lion. Men climb up on these, and birds sit on them. The candle piece is held by salamanders. The pairs of dragons represent the two primal psychic powers in their untamed, chaotic state. They correspond to the caduceus. The vine which sprouts from the mouth of the solar lion is a primordial symbol of life, as is a spring of water issuing forth from a leonine mask. From the Christian point of view it is also a symbol of the word of God. The salamander is the animal of fire.





as 'essence', and the passive pole as 'substance'. In a certain sense essence corresponds to the Spirit or Intellect, inasmuch as the *formae* or essential predeterminations of things are contained in the Divine Intellect as 'prototypes' or 'archetypes'.

One might here object that the idea of 'form' cannot be enlarged in an 'upward' direction without abolishing the distinction between 'formal' and 'supra-formal' manifestation – that is to say, the distinction between the 'individual' realm and the 'universal' realm which is that of the one Spirit. To this it may be answered that the term 'formal' can only be applied to that something which, by means of a form, is 'imprinted' on a substance. In itself form can be looked on not only as a limitation or outline, but also as a 'bundle' of qualities not 'substantially' or 'materially' determined. In this last sense it can be applied right up to the unitary aspects of Being. Indeed in the writings of the medieval theologians of all three monotheistic religions one comes across the expression 'the form of God' (*forma Dei*; in Arabic *aş-şûratu 'l-ilâhiyah*) for the totality of divine qualities. The 'essence' of God, which reveals itself through these qualities, is in Itself unconditioned and above all qualities.

Σ

Plate 4 THE FLOWER OF THE WISE. *In the Hermetic egg lies the dragon Uroboros which, as the symbol of unredeemed Nature or unformed materia devours its own tail. Out of the egg grow the red flower of gold, the white flower of silver, and, between them, the blue 'flower of the wise'. Underneath are sun and moon and between them is the star of 'philosophic' Quicksilver. — Page from the 'Alchemical Manuscript' of 1550 in Basle University Library.*

In his book *The Sceptical Chymist*, published in 1661, Robert Boyle attacked the traditional doctrine of the four elements as the foundations of all corporeal *materia*. He demonstrated that earth, water, and air are not indivisible bodies but are composed of various chemical constituents. He believed that by so doing he had destroyed alchemy in its very roots. What he actually shattered, however, was not true alchemy but a crude and badly understood conception of the traditional doctrine of the four elements, for true alchemy never regarded earth, water, air, and fire as corporeal or chemical substances in the present-day sense of the word. The four elements are simply the primary, and most general, qualities by means of which the amorphous and purely quantitative substance of all bodies first reveals itself in differentiated form. The immutable essence of each element has likewise nothing to do with any corporeal indivisibility, and in reality the fact that water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen and air of oxygen and nitrogen in no wise alters the immediate experience of four fundamental 'conditions' of corporeal *materia*, of which earth, water, air, and fire are the most general examples. Even the chemical constituents into which the first three items can be broken down fall themselves into these categories. A certain difficulty in understanding the doctrine concerning the four elements may arise from the fact that while these four 'modes of manifestation' are on the one hand a primary qualitative differentiation of *materia*, they nevertheless, as far as their relationship to actual bodies is concerned, play the role of passive and formable substances. In this last respect, namely as material or substantial foundations, the four elements can be compared – as was done by ar-Râzî (Rhazes), for example – with more or less dense states of corporeal

substances, or even more so with various types of vibrations, though all of these similes are only approximately adequate, for the element as such remains beyond (or beneath) corporeal manifestation, just as the *materia* of the whole corporeal world is itself not perceptible.

From all this one can see that an alchemy which is conscious of its cosmological foundations could not have believed that it was by chemical procedures that the four elements were reducible to each other, and to their common underlying substance – as the Hermetic art taught. If this teaching were indeed followed in its true meaning, it could only lead away from the outward empirical level into a completely other ontological 'dimension'. According to both Western and Eastern alchemists the elements are never present in bodies in their pure form. Each corporeal substance contains all four elements, with one or other preponderating and thus imprinting its character on the corporeal appearance. Thus ordinary water is not identical with the element of the same name, although it is its most immediate manifestation, and at the same time is one in essence both with it and with the passive aspect of primordial or universal substance. The fact that everywhere throughout the various levels of existence there are 'vertical' links with universal prototypes means that the cosmological view of nature – and also every art based on it – possesses a hierarchically arranged multiplicity of meanings.

The common basis of the four elements, when one looks at things in general and in a 'synthetic' manner, is none other than the *materia prima* of the world. Looking at things more exactly, however, the elements do not proceed directly from *materia prima* but from its first determination, ether, which fills all space equally, and which in alchemical writings is referred to either as a *materia* or as a *quinta*



*essentia* – depending on whether it is viewed materially or qualitatively.

The fullest explanation of the four elements is to be found in the Hindu cosmology of *sankhya*. According to this the corporeal elements or *bhutas*, which pertain to the material world in the broadest sense of the term, are matched by the same number of 'essential measures' or *tanmātras* which are contained in the cognitive subject. Both groups of primordial determinations, the *tanmātras* as well as the *bhutas*, derive ultimately from *prakṛiti* (*materia prima*). They are filtered through *ahankāra*, the *principium individuationis* or ego-consciousness, and divided into the objective and subjective poles of the manifested world.

This explanation of the elements corresponds exactly to the Hermetic view. It also shows how visible appearances can be transposed into the inward realm, for the same *tanmātras* also 'measure' psychic phenomena.

If the elements are listed in the order of their material 'fineness' or 'subtlety', earth comes lowest, and air highest. If, however, they are ordered according to the directions of their movement, fire occupies the highest place. Earth is characterized by heaviness: it possesses a downward tendency. Water is likewise 'heavy', but also has the capacity of 'extension'. Air both rises and extends, whereas fire rises exclusively.

According to Hermetic tradition the natural order of the elements is represented either by a cross, whose central point then corresponds to the *quinta essentia*, or by concentric circles, in which case earth is the middle point, and fire the outermost circle. Again, it may be represented by the individual parts of the 'Seal of Solomon', which consists of two intersecting equilateral triangles. The triangle pointing upwards  $\triangle$  corresponds to fire, and the triangle pointing downwards  $\nabla$  corresponds to water.

The triangle representing fire, with the horizontal side of the other triangle, represents air  $\triangle$ , while the upturning of this sign represents earth  $\nabla$ . The complete seal of Solomon  $\star$  represents the synthesis of all elements and thus the union of all opposites.

\*

The traditional view of *materia* as the passive and receptive ground of all multiplicity and differentiation, makes it possible to apply the same concept outside the corporeal domain. Thus one may speak of a *materia* of the soul, given that the psychic world also consists of a multiple and changing 'imprinting' of essential forms, and thus possesses an active (or essential) and a passive (or substantial or 'material') pole.

The substantial pole of the soul, in other words its *materia*, is expressed in its capacity to take on and to maintain forms, that is to say, in its pure and illimitable 'receptivity'. That is its feminine side – and one may take this almost literally, for in the nature of woman this aspect of the soul predominates and even shows itself physically. In woman soul and body are relatively close to one another as a result of the 'passive' characteristics common to both – a fact which ennobles the body but binds the soul.

The 'forms' taken on by the 'substance' or 'material' of the soul come from without as well as from within. This means that empirically they come from without, through the senses. They are essential forms only in so far as they correspond to the immutable prototypes contained in the Intellect, which constitute the real content of all knowledge. The essential pole of the soul is thus the Intellect (or Spirit). It is its 'form'. This expression may

well sound peculiar. It must not be taken to mean that the Intellect in itself has any particular 'form'. If indeed the term 'essential form' can be applied to the Intellect, this is only so because in its action on the *materia* of a given soul it 'imprints' the 'personal form' of the soul, and so, along with the latter, forms the personal being. For the same reasons – that is, having regard to the interrelationship of spirit and soul, and because the qualitative uniqueness of the person comes from the Spirit – it is possible to speak of the 'spirit' of a particular being, or of 'spirits' in the plural. Thus it is in the case of a light, of which a ray – or a bundle of rays – is intercepted by a reflecting surface: light in itself has no particular direction, it spreads out into the whole of space. In its relationship to the reflecting surface, however, it has a direction, and seems, without any essential change of nature, as if it were a ray. So it is that everything that is spirit, is 'made of knowledge' and wholly one with the Light of Truth. And yet when the Spirit is present in the soul, it appears as an individual being.

As spirit and soul cannot be circumscribed like two corporeal things, every simile that one may use to convey their reciprocal relationship is somehow too simple and too crude. Nevertheless such similes convey much more than attempted psychological descriptions, which of necessity relate everything to the psychic plane alone, with the result that the spiritual pole is only perceived indirectly, as a particular aspect of the psychic world. This is the case, for example, in the psychological distinction between *animus* and *anima*, which has but the remotest connection with the true relationship between spirit and soul, as is shown by the fact (amongst other things) that *animus* receives a 'rational' slant. In reality it is only a psychic and passive reflection of the Spirit.

In his book *On the Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage* (Book II, chapter 4), Ruysbroek writes: 'In all men there is by nature a threefold unity, which moreover in the case of the just is supernatural. The first and highest unity to be found in men is God, for all creatures depend on Divine Unity for their very being, life, and existence. If they could dissolve this relationship, they would fall into nothingness and be annihilated. This unity is in us essentially by nature, whether we be good or bad. Without our co-operation it makes us neither holy nor happy. While this unity is in us, it is at the same time above us, as the foundation and support of our life.'

'A second union, or unity, is likewise present in us by nature. This is the unity of the higher faculties, a unity which derives from the fact that, as regards their activity, these faculties spring naturally from the unity of the Spirit itself. It is still that same unity which we possess in God, but here it is regarded from the active side, and not from the point of view of essence. The Spirit is just as much present in the one unity as in the other, in all the fullness of its being. This second unity we possess in ourselves, quite above the realm of the senses. From it derive thought, reason, will and all the possibilities of spiritual activity. Here the soul bears the name of spirit.'

'The third unity which is in us by nature consists of the domain of the lower faculties, which have their seat in the heart, the basis and source of animal life. It is in the body, and especially in the action of the heart that the soul possesses this unity, from which all activities of the body and the five senses proceed. Here it bears its own name of soul, for it is the "form" of the body which it animates, the body which it makes to live and keeps alive.'

'These three unities which are in man by nature consti-



tute a single life and a single realm. In its lowest unity this life is sensory and animal; in the middle unity it is rational and spiritual; and in the highest unity it is contained in its own essence. This belongs to all men by nature . . .'

Ruysbroek characterizes the soul in the literal sense of the word (*anima, psyche*), by its tendency towards the sensory faculties, by which he means the level of the ego-bound empirical soul in contradistinction from the spirit. But the relationship spirit-soul can also be looked at in another way. When we speak of the soul as the *materia* of the spirit, we do not mean the mere tissue of ego-consciousness, but rather the passive and receptive capacity which lies much deeper and which, precisely, is veiled by the habitual attachment of the soul to the senses. That the soul as ego should be confounded with the body makes it fragmentary and in a certain sense 'congealed', and this prevents it from mirroring the Spirit freely and without distortion.

What corresponds to the chaotic soul on the mineral plane is the condition of base metal, especially lead which in its obscurity and heaviness resembles crude mass. According to the famous Moslem mystic Muhyi 'd-Dîn ibn 'Arabî, gold corresponds to the sound and original condition of the soul which freely and without distortion reflects the Divine Spirit in its essence, whereas lead corresponds to its 'sick', distorted, and 'dead' condition, which no longer reflects the Spirit. The true essence of lead is gold. Each base metal represents a break in the equilibrium which gold alone exhibits.

In order to free the soul from its coagulation and paralysis, its essential form and its *materia* must be dissolved out of their crude and one-sided combination. It is as if spirit and soul had to be separated from one another, in order,

after their 'divorce', to become 'married' again. The amorphous *materia* is burnt, dissolved, and purified, in order finally to be 'coagulated' anew in the form of a perfect crystal.

The form of the soul thus 'born again' is nevertheless distinguishable from the all-embracing Spirit, as it still belongs to conditioned existence. But at the same time it is transparent to the undifferentiated Light of the Spirit and in vital union with the primordial *materia* of all souls; for the 'material' or 'substantial' ground of the soul, just like its essential or active ground, has a unitary nature. That all souls are 'made of one substance' can be known from the fact that the 'movements' (emotions) of the souls of all living creatures – in spite of the immense variety of species and levels of consciousness – proceed in a similar fashion. One could say that they are like the waves of the same sea.

Alchemical doctrine and symbolism never have the complete (spiritual) 'extinction' of the individual in view, as have such concepts as the Hindu *moksha*, the Buddhist *nirvana*, the Sufi *fand'u 'l-fand'i*, and likewise the Christian *unio mystica* or *deificatio* in the highest meaning of these last two expressions. This is because alchemy is based on a purely cosmological vision and therefore can only be transposed indirectly to the metacosmic or divine realm. Since, however, alchemical realization can represent a stage on the way to that highest of all goals, it has nevertheless been incorporated into Christian and Islamic mysticism. Alchemical transmutation brings the centre of human consciousness into direct contact with that divine ray which irresistibly attracts the soul upwards and lets it savour by anticipation the Kingdom of Heaven.

The application of the mutually complementary concepts *forma* and *materia* to the realm of the soul makes it clear in what sense certain sensible data such as the four elements are to be transposed onto the psychic plane. Just like the corporeal *materia*, which manifests itself most readily in the four elements, so the *materia* of the soul, in its deployment, has several mutually opposing tendencies. It has a tendency 'downwards', towards inertia and earthy denseness. At the same time it has a tendency 'upwards' like the element fire, towards the Spirit. Again it has a tendency towards expansion – either passive and relatively inert, like that of water, or more active and mobile, like that of air. As applied to the soul, 'earth' is that aspect or tendency which causes it to sink into the body and which attaches it to the latter. 'Fire' has the same purifying and transmuting character as outward fire. 'Water' is capable of assuming all forms. In its original and uncorrupted nature water is, in the words of St Francis of Assisi, *umile e preziosa e casta* ('humble and precious and chaste'). For the soul, 'air', free and mobile, envelops all forms of consciousness.

The signs of the four elements derived from the Seal of Solomon are particularly lucid when it comes to their application to the soul. From them, it can be seen that the plurality of the elements derives from the opposition of fire  $\Delta$  and water  $\nabla$ , that is, from the pair activity-passivity (which of course corresponds to the pair *forma-materia*). It is the same opposition which we shall later encounter in the form of sulphur and quicksilver. Through the union of opposites  $\star$  the soul becomes 'fluid fire' and 'fiery water', and at the same time also acquires the positive qualities of the other elements, so that its water becomes 'stable' and its fire 'non-burning'; for the 'fire' of the soul is that which confers stability on its 'water',

while the 'water' of the soul confers on 'fire' the mildness and ubiquity of 'air'.

The 'inward elements' may also be considered as pure qualities of the spirit, and ultimately as immutable aspects of Being. Seen in this way, their union and reconciliation consists in the fact that in each individual elemental quality the others are also contained, for Pure Being is both simple and inexhaustibly rich. The highest meaning of alchemy is the knowledge that all is contained in all, and its *magisterium* is none other than the realization of this truth on the plane of the soul. This realization is effected by means of the creation of the 'elixir', which unites in itself all the powers of the soul, and thus acts as a transmuting 'ferment' on the psychic world and, in an indirect fashion, on the outward world also.

As there is no corporeal substance that is completely cut off from the higher modes of being it is possible in certain circumstances to transpose powers pertaining to the soul or spirit onto a corporeal substance, so that in a certain way they become attached to it. Thus the inward elixir of the alchemists may in some cases have an outward counterpart.

## PLANETS AND METALS

The alchemists designate the various metals by the same symbols as those which they attribute to the planets and indeed often give both metals and planets the same names. For gold they say 'sun', for silver 'moon', for quicksilver 'Mercury', for copper 'Venus', for iron 'Mars', for tin 'Jupiter', and for lead 'Saturn'. The correspondences thus established clearly demonstrate the relationship between alchemy and astrology, a relationship based on that law which the 'Emerald Tablet' expresses in the words: 'Whatever is below is like that which is above.'

Astrology and alchemy, which in their Western form both derive from the Hermetic tradition, are related to one another as heaven and earth. Astrology interprets the meaning of the zodiac and the planets, and alchemy the meaning of the elements and the metals. The twelve signs of the zodiac are a simplified picture of the archetypes immutably contained in the Divine Intellect. The elements fire, air, water, and earth, on the other hand, symbolically manifest the first and fundamental differentiation of primordial substance (*materia prima*, *hyle*). Whereas the planets, by virtue of their positions in relation to one another, manifest in differentiated and temporal mode the possibilities contained in the zodiac, and thus represent the ways of action of the Divine Spirit 'descending' from Heaven to earth, the metals for their part represent the first fruits of elemental substance,<sup>1</sup> 'ripened' by the Spirit or Intellect.

<sup>1</sup> Expressed more synthetically, metal is a spiritual manifestation of corporeal *materia*, whereas the planets, or the stars in general, represent a corporeal manifestation of the Spirit. The relationship of

Alchemy teaches that the metals were generated in the dark womb of the earth under the influence of the seven planets – that is, sun, moon, and the five planets visible to the naked eye. This way of looking at things must not be regarded as a physical explanation. It indicates how material manifestations derive – essentially, but not physically – from the two principal poles of existence. In the complementary régimes of stars and metals, there is a kind of ontological scale, to which all aspects of nature can be related. This is true not only in the case of 'outward' nature, the macrocosm, but also for the microcosm, that is to say, the psycho-physical constitution of man. Just as in alchemy there are 'inward' metals, so in astrology there are 'inward' planets.

A certain variability in the pairing of metals and planets arises from the fact that some alchemical schools regard mercury, because of its 'volatility' and its effect on other metals, not as a metal or 'body', but as a volatile agent or 'spirit'. In such cases a metal other than quicksilver takes its place in the seven-runged ladder – sometimes an alloy. What is essential is that each of the seven metals represents a definite 'type', which includes a whole group of mutually related metals.<sup>2</sup>

The duality of the active and receptive poles of existence expressed in the complementarism of heaven and earth, or of planets and metals, is reflected within each of the two groups in the relationship of sun and moon, and of gold and silver. The sun, or gold, is in a certain sense the incarnation of the active and generative pole of existence,

planets and metals is the same as that expressed in the Arab proverb: 'The beauty of man is in his intelligence, and the intelligence of woman is in her beauty.' The planets are embodied intelligence; the metals intelligent bodies.

<sup>2</sup> For some Hellenistic alchemists electrum takes the place of quicksilver.

whereas the moon or silver incarnates the receptive pole, the *materia prima*. Gold is sun; sun is spirit. Silver, or moon, is soul.

The other metals, and the other planets, participate to varying degrees in the two poles of existence. Neither pole is manifested entirely in any one of them.

The gradation of cosmic qualities – manifested actively in the planets, and passively in the metals – is clearly expressed in the seven signs which stand for both planets and metals. These are listed here in the order of the planetary orbits as seen from the point of view of the earth:

)	☿	♀	☼	♂	♃	♄
Moon	Mercury	Venus	Sun	Mars	Jupiter	Saturn
silver	quicksilver	copper	gold	iron	tin	lead

In contradistinction from the usual way of representing the sign for Mars – as a circle with an arrow ♂ (a form which deviates completely from the style of the other signs) – Mars is here represented by a circle with a cross above it. We may suppose that Mars was earlier designated in this way and that the now more usual sign was introduced in order to distinguish it from that of Venus in charts of the heavens without a clear indication of top and bottom. The use of the earlier sign for Mars (♂) as a designation of the earth only arose with the heliocentric world picture, and is nothing other than the Christian symbol of the globe surmounted by the cross.

Thus the seven planetary signs are formed from three basic figures: the circle, the semicircle, and the cross. As the circle is also the sign for the sun, and the semicircle for the moon, these two figures can be regarded as representations of the complete and of the half orbits of the sun respectively. Their spiritual interpretation is in no wise altered thereby, as the half orbit of the sun, which

measures one of the two phases of the year, is contained in the whole, just as the light of the moon proceeds entirely from the sun. The third basic figure, the cross, recalls, astronomically speaking, the cross of the four directions of space, and, alchemically speaking, the four elements. Inscribed in one another, the three basic figures give rise to the 'wheel of Heaven': ⊕.

Thus, in the seven signs, we find an expression of the whole cosmic hierarchy which was mentioned above. This hierarchy is the result of the polarization of existence into an active or masculine pole ☉ and a passive or feminine pole ♀, and its genesis is due to the fact that the influence of the former on the latter (which plays the role of plastic *materia*) is to imprint conditions on the latter which 'cross-cut' one another +. That sun and moon correspond to the two poles of existence can be seen both in the relationship between a source of light and the surface that reflects it, and in the fact that the form of the moon changes, whereas that of the sun always remains the same. Becoming belongs to the passive side, while the Pure Act of the Essence remains motionless. The third basic figure of the planetary signs, the cross, is the most general of the symbols which represent the differentiation (under the influence of the active pole) of the possibilities latent in passive *materia*. It is the cross of the four elements.

It is important to remember that the sun, or gold, is not the active pole as such, but only its principal reflection within a given realm. The same is true of the moon, or silver, which corresponds to the passive pole. Strictly speaking, the symbol of the passive pole has no form of its own, as *materia prima* is without form. It can thus only be the complement or the fragmentation of the symbol of the active pole, which is why the semicircle, the crescent

moon, or the half solar orbit, symbolizes the passive cause. Thus it is that gold unites in itself all 'metallic light' or all 'colour', while silver, like a mirror, is colourless.

The planets (except sun and moon), and the base metals, are variations on a single prototype, which is incarnated wholly only in the sun and in gold. In them either the solar or the lunar cause is predominant – without, however, achieving full expression, for the varying combinations of circle or semicircle with the cross indicate a certain rupture of the original equilibrium of the elements. Every rupture of this equilibrium (depending on whether, in its sign, the solar or lunar figure is located above, below, or on the horizontal arm of the cross) is associated with a different quality. Thus in the sign ♄ for Saturn or lead, the crescent is attached to the lower arm of the cross, at the lowest point, so to say, of the material order – lead, in fact, being the densest and most 'chaotic' of metals. In the sign ♃ for Jupiter the crescent is attached to the horizontal arm. From the alchemical point of view this corresponds to tin's middle position between lead and silver. A sign with the crescent on the topmost point of the cross does not exist. It would be synonymous with the sign for the moon, for, where the lunar cause is entirely predominant, it dissolves the elemental differentiations, *materia prima* being pure, unformed receptivity, like water. On the other hand there is a sign (that of Venus or copper ♀) in which the sun appears above the cross, for the active, form-giving cause does not dissolve the elemental differentiations, but, rather, reinforces them, before bringing them to perfect equilibrium in the form of gold. According to Basilius Valentinus copper contains an excess of unfixed sun-power like a tree which has too much resin. Its opposite – both as regards its sign and its nature – is iron ♂; in it the sun is to be found under the cross and

thus hidden in the darkness of the earth. In the geocentric world-picture Mars ♂ and Venus ♀ stand closest to one another; they are the mythological pair of lovers.

One single sign, that of Mercury or quicksilver, contains all three basic figures: the cross, the circle, and the semicircle. In it the lunar cause predominates over the solar which, for its part, 'fixes' the cross of the elemental pairs of opposites. We shall return frequently to this sign, for it is the true key to the alchemical work, just as Mercury or Hermes is the ancestor of alchemy. In the meantime let it merely be said that this sign, and the metal to which it corresponds, expresses *materia prima* as the bearer of all forms. Quicksilver is likewise the 'womb' of all metals, while silver resembles the virginal condition of pure *materia prima*. This also explains why the alchemists represent the 'material' or feminine cause – *materia* – in so far as it enters into their works by both the moon (or silver) and by quicksilver. The latter corresponds to the 'productive' power of *materia*, its 'dynamic' aspect, just as sulphur – the 'opposite' of quicksilver – is the active power of the solar or masculine cause. In a certain sense the Chinese theory regarding sun and moon can be applied to gold and silver: the sun, say the Chinese, is congealed *yang*, and the moon congealed *yin*. Likewise gold is congealed or static 'sulphur', and silver is congealed 'quicksilver'. It is hardly necessary to remark that all these relationships must not be understood in a physical sense, but on the background of a cosmology which goes beyond the corporeal domain.

The series of seven signs for planets and metals can be regarded as a simplified representation of a given cosmological domain. In every domain there is what may be called a centre, that is to say, a qualitative high-point in which the prototype or cause, which governs the whole

domain, reveals itself most immediately and fully. Such is gold amongst metals, the jewel amongst stones, the rose or the lotus amongst flowers, the lion amongst quadrupeds, the eagle amongst birds, and man amongst all living creatures on earth. In each case the 'central' manifestation is 'noble', because, as a symbol, it is as complete and integral as possible. Contrariwise, the 'peripheric' manifestations are more or less 'base', in so far as they express only incidental qualities or aspects of the one prototype.<sup>3</sup>

Here it should be noted that while man in his specific nature always symbolically represents the centre of the earthly realm, this is not necessarily so with regard to his individuality. The animal always remains true to the essential form of his species. In a passive way he participates in that ray of the Divine Intellect which reveals itself in him through his very existence. (The so-called 'instinct' of the animals pertains to this passive participation in the Intellect.) Man, on the other hand, is created for the purpose of participating actively in the Divine Intellect, of which he is the 'central' reflection. Only when he does so is he truly the centre of the earthly state, and even, in proportion to his identification with the Intellect, of the whole of formal manifestation or of the whole cosmos. The 'realization' of the centre of the earthly state is the real goal of alchemy, and also the deepest meaning of gold. Gold is a 'body' like other metals, but the mass, density and divisibility of bodies

<sup>3</sup> It should nevertheless be understood that only a complete domain of existence has an unequivocal centre; thus man is the unequivocal centre of the whole of the earthly state. On the other hand, partial domains have no more than relative centres, which are frequently manifested in varied and mutually complementary forms. Thus in the realm of birds, besides the eagle, there is the nightingale, and also the dove and the peacock, or again the swan and the owl, each of which, in its respective fashion, manifests a 'centre'.

have in it been transmuted into pure, symbolical quality. It is incarnated light. The alchemists themselves often describe the goal of their work as a 'volatilization of the solid and a solidification of the volatile' or as a 'spiritualization of the body and an embodiment of the spirit'. Gold is nothing else than this.

Only in the sign for gold is the midpoint of the circle represented, which indicates that in gold alone does the essential unity of the prototype with its material reflection find expression. Likewise, it is only in perfect man that the similarity of the creature with God becomes spiritually effective.

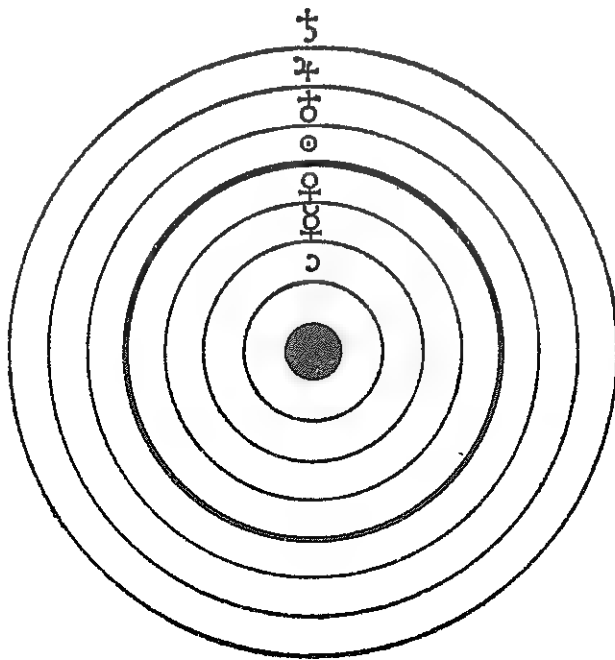


In the words of the 'Emerald Tablet' – according to which whatever is below is like that which is above, and whatever is above is like that which is below – there is a reference to a mirror-like inversion of the two sides. In reality the 'gradation' of the metals (according to their greater or lesser similarity to gold) is inverse to that of the planets, which enjoy a higher rank the further their orbit is from the earth-centre. An exception here is the sun, which corresponds to gold, and whose sphere is in the middle between two sets of three planetary orbits. Above the sun, from below upwards, are the orbits of Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Beneath it, in descending order towards the earth, are the orbits of Venus, Mercury, and the Moon. If, upwards and outwards, one adds the fixed stars to the planetary spheres, then the series must be completed, downwards and in the direction of the centre, by the addition of the earth. In one way or another, even in the geocentric world-picture, the sun represents a centre, quite apart from the fact that, as the source of light for all the planets, it is already their centre.



The combination of the two symbolic orders (in which, on the one hand, the greater or lesser breadth of 'the heavens' is paramount, and on the other the central position of the sun), also crops up in the application of the planetary qualities to the human being. Here it acquires a meaning which is particularly instructive as far as the world-picture common to both alchemy and cosmology is concerned.

Saturn, whose orbit is the widest from the point of view of the earth, corresponds to intelligence, or more exactly, to the intellect, while the moon, whose orbit is nearest to the earth-centre, is analogous to the 'vital spirit' which binds soul and body to each other. These are the two outermost poles of the soul's capacity, for the vital spirit, which governs the involuntary activities of the body, such as growth and digestion, and which for this reason has an 'existential' rather than a 'rational' character, is in a certain sense opposed to the intellect. Between these two



outermost poles, the other faculties of the soul are ranged. These are variously designated and related to the planets, depending on whether the side of 'knowledge' or of 'will' is taken the more into account. In every case the sun corresponds to a faculty which lies midway between the two poles and in a sense unites them. According to Macrobius (who, in his commentary on Scipio's dream, considers the hierarchy of the planets in connection with the Pythagorean-Orphic doctrine of the descent of the soul from outermost heaven to earth), the sun is analogous to the faculty which animates the five senses and synthesizes their impressions. The sun is thus the prototype of the life of the 'sensory soul'. According to another and more profound view of things, that of 'Abd al-Karîm al-Jîlî, for example, in his book on 'Universal Man' (*al-insân al-kâmil*),<sup>4</sup> the sun is analogous to the heart (*al-qalb*), the organ of intuitive, unitive knowledge, which completely transcends all other faculties of the soul. Just as the sun gives the planets their light, so the light of the heart (seat of the spirit or intellect) illumines all other faculties of the soul.

'Intelligence' is here used to translate *ratio* in the old (and not in the 'rationalistic') sense of the word (Greek: *nous*; Arabic: *al-'aql*). As the faculty of fundamental and comprehensive thought, intelligence in this sense – or the human intellect – is related to the all-comprehending Divine Intellect. In the Divine Intellect, however, the two aspects 'Knowledge' and 'Being' are both present, whereas in the human intellect there is the aspect 'knowledge' alone, for in a certain sense the human intellect is separate from what it knows. The wider and more comprehensive its vision, the more it is detached from its

<sup>4</sup> See my partial translation of this work: *De l'homme universel*, Derain, Lyon, 1953.

object. The 'vital spirit', on the other hand, is (subjectively and according to common experience) unreservedly immersed in corporeal existence. These are the two outermost limits of ego-bound or individual consciousness, and it may well be said that this consciousness is split between mind (*nous*) and body. The Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* ('I think, therefore I am') is immediately refuted by the fact that thinking is *not* capable of grasping its own being. The utterance 'I am' is either the expression of a transcendent and ever-present certitude infinitely above all thought, or merely of the common experience of individual corporeal existence, which does no more than passively accompany thought, however much it may be swathed in a whole network of imaginings. Knowledge and being are reflected separately in individual consciousness as mind and body. To escape this duality, consciousness must return to the 'sun' of the heart. As the alchemists say, 'body' must again become 'spirit', and 'spirit' 'body'.

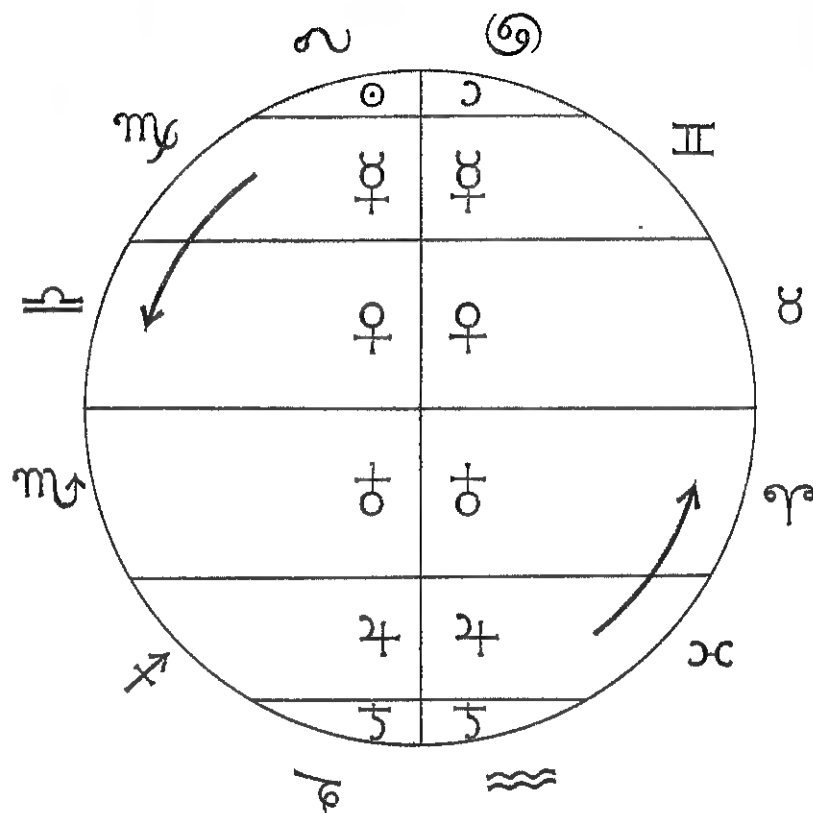
Of the other planets, Jupiter is usually compared to the faculty of decision (Arabic: *al-himmah*). It thus represents the spiritual or intellectual form of the will. To Mars belongs courage; Al-Jîlî also attributes to it 'active imagination' (*al-wahm*). Both attributes are related to the 'demiurgic', world-bent will. According to Macrobius and all the Hellenistic cosmologists, Venus is the star of amorous passion. For al-Jîlî Venus is above all the prototype of the 'passive imagination' (*al-khiyâl*), and is related to the 'active imagination' of Mars as is wax to a seal. For all cosmologists Mercury is the prototype of analytical thought (*al-fikr*). To the moon Macrobius attributes the faculty of generation and bodily movement. This is defined even more exactly by St Albert the Great as *motus quos movet, in sequendo naturam corporis, ut attrahendo,*

*mutuando, augendo et generando*, and these are exactly the modes of action of the vital spirit (*spiritus vitalis, ar-rû.*), which al-Jîlî attributes to the moon.

The hierarchy of planets is descending, and that of the corresponding metals, ascending. The former are active, the latter passive. As inert material, metal cannot be the symbol either of a 'cognitive' or a 'volitive' faculty. Thus, because of its static and unformed nature, it is the expression of a similarly static state of consciousness, that is to say, of an inward consciousness not bound to mental forms. This is none other than the inward consciousness of the individual body. It is its 'soul-form'. From this 'metal' the alchemist must extract the 'metallic soul' and the 'metallic spirit'. The chaotic and 'opaque' bodily consciousness, encumbered with passions and habits, is 'base' metal. In it soul and spirit seem suffocated, darkened, mixed with earth. On the other hand, 'illuminated' bodily consciousness ('noble' metal), is itself a spiritual mode of existence. The soul must first be extracted from base metal, the alchemists say. The remaining body is to be purified and burnt until it is no more than ashes. Then the soul is to be reunited with it. When the body is thus 'dissolved' in the soul, so that both constitute a pure *materia*, the Spirit acts on the soul and confers on it an incorruptible form. That is to say, it transmutes individual bodily consciousness back into its own purely spiritual possibility, where, in all its fullness and according to its own essence, it remains motionless and indivisible. Basilus Valentinus compares this state with the 'glorious body' of the resurrected.

Alongside the planetary hierarchy which is inversely related to that of the metals, there is also another and older ordering of the planets which runs parallel to the alchemical order. This is their gradation according to

'houses', the distribution of which in the zodiac only becomes meaningful when their common axis is situated in the way in which, in all probability, it was situated in the original zodiac of about two thousand years before



*The Planetary 'Houses' ca. 2000 B.C.*

Christ. At that time the axis of the solstice passed between Leo and Cancer at the upper end, so that, as a result, the so-called planetary 'houses' became symmetrically arranged. As Julius Schwabe has shown,<sup>5</sup> there is much to suggest that this position of the heavens was fundamental for all astrological symbolism. Furthermore, as the alchemical meaning of the planetary signs is identical with

the astrological, it may be presumed that the same cosmic moment also saw the birth of alchemy in the traditional form in which it has existed up to modern times.

Each planet possesses two adjacent 'houses', a left and a right, or a feminine and a masculine, with the exception of the moon and the sun which have only one house each and rule respectively the feminine and the masculine halves of the zodiac. In the lowest position of this picture of the heavens, on the two sides of the winter solstice, in the place of darkness and death, 'dwells' Saturn, which corresponds to lead amongst the metals. Its sign ♄ shows the lunar crescent in the lowest position. Symbolically this represents the chaotic immersion of consciousness in the body. On the other hand, the sign for Jupiter or tin ♃, in which the crescent occupies the next highest position, already indicates a first step in the loosing of the soul from the elemental pairs of opposites. The 'moon' of the soul here touches the horizontal bar of the cross, which signifies cosmic expansion. Immediately under the horizontal middle axis of the whole zodiac lie the two houses of Mars and immediately above, those of Venus. Their two signs, ♂ and ♀, are as mirror images of one another. The sign for Mars, which corresponds to iron, exhibits a congealing or a sinking of the spirit into the corporeal. In the sign for Venus or copper, on the other hand, the 'sun' of the spirit appears above the 'tree' of the elemental tendencies. The colour of gold becomes visible, but it is not yet purified. Over this lie the two houses of Mercury or quicksilver. Its sign ☿ is the only one which contains the figures of both sun and moon. Quicksilver contains in its lunar 'water' the fiery germ of the sun, just as the original power of the soul bears within it the germ of the essential Spirit. For the alchemists quicksilver is the 'mother of gold' and the *primum agens* of their work. Sun

<sup>5</sup> Julius Schwabe, *Archetyp und Tierkreis*, Basel, 1951.

and moon stand opposite one another in their houses at the top of the zodiac. The moon ☾ is analogous to the soul in its state of pure receptivity, and the sun is analogous to the spirit, or, more exactly, to the soul transmuted and illumined by the spirit, representing the perfect union of spirit, soul, and body.

The sun does not merely govern in its own 'house', it also traverses the whole zodiac, ascending through its 'mascu-



*'Finis corruptionis et principio generationis' (The end of corruption and the beginning of generation). The struggle of the two primordial forces sun and moon, Sulphur and Quicksilver in the heavenly circle. — From the so-called 'Ripley Scrowle' in the British Museum Library.*

line' side and descending through its 'feminine' side. The 'solstice' between descent and ascent lies in the domain of Saturn, and, in its leaden 'chaos' the life of the sun and of gold is hidden.

The alchemical myth of King Gold, who must be killed and buried, in order that he may awake again to life, and who, ascending through seven régimes, attains his full glory, is nothing other than an expression of this astrological symbolism. This symbolism, however, is the cosmic reflection of an inner law: the divine spark in man corresponds to the sun. It seems to die when the soul enters the house of Saturn. In truth, however, it arises anew and, ascending through the seven levels of consciousness, becomes the 'red lion' — the all-transmuting elixir.

## THE ROTATION OF THE ELEMENTS

As has been said above, spiritual alchemy was not necessarily involved in outward metallurgical operations, even if it made use of them as similes. It is nevertheless to be supposed that originally the inward and the outward work went hand in hand, for, within the framework of an organic civilization orientated towards man's highest goal, a craft can only have meaning when it serves a spiritual way. A symbolical form of expression, for its part, only finds its justification in immediate experience. It is therefore appropriate at this point to look at some of the simplest of the metallurgical processes which at all times have served as symbolical supports for alchemy.

Apart from purely metallurgical procedures (such as extracting metal from a mixed or impure ore, smelting it, and, if necessary, combining it with another metal, in order to make good its specific defects) there is also the production of those chemical substances which act on metals (either purifying them, or giving them specific properties such as greater fusibility, greater hardness, or a particular colour). Among such substances are antimony and sulphur, as well as quicksilver, which, although a metal itself, also acts as a solvent on other metals.

As the production and use of these chemicals also come within the competence of the metallurgist, it will be seen that the scope of his activities corresponds to all intents and purposes to that of modern chemistry. This is why related crafts, such as the production of coloured glass and artificial precious stones, and the preparation of dyes, were also incorporated into the basically metallurgical tradition of alchemy and its symbolic language.

Famous alchemists, such as Jâbir ibn Hayyân, Abu Bakr ar-Râzî (died 925), and Geber, mention in their works a whole series of fundamental operations which, though obviously chemical in nature, also serve as the symbols of inward processes, on account of their general and typical character.

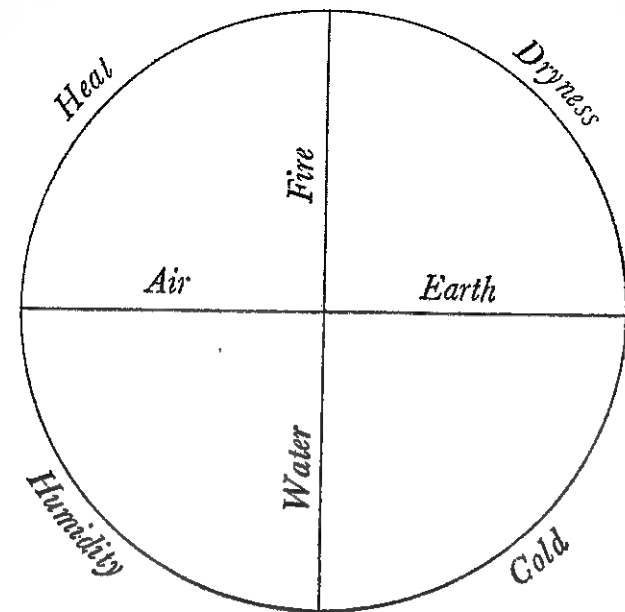
According to Jâbir there are four processes which govern the alchemical work: firstly, the purification of substances, then their solution, followed by a new coagulation, and finally their combination. Ar-Râzî includes many more operations – most of them also to be found in Geber's *Summa Perfectionis* – of which we shall only mention the most important here: Volatilization or sublimation served, as it still does today, to separate an evaporable substance from a mixture, and so obtain it in its pure state. As is known, sulphur is produced in this manner. Descension, on the other hand, was used to separate a fusible substance (a metal) by draining it off from non-fusible minerals. Distillation was a filtering of soluble substances. Burning or calcination changed a metal into a soluble oxide which, when dissolved (dissolution) could be separated from insoluble substances mixed with it. It then had to be brought back to its non-oxidized state by renewed coagulation and reduction. Volatile substances could be 'fixed' and made stable by fire, and hard substances could be made wax-like and fusible by incineration. In these operations, besides purely mineral agents, organic agents such as oil and urine were also used.

If practical alchemy remained without the analytical knowledge which is at the disposal of modern chemistry, its eye, for that very reason, was all the sharper for the qualitative aspects of matter and its transformations. In this respect its methods were often exceedingly fine, and it is possible that they sometimes gained access to areas which modern science leaves out of account. Nature has many faces.

The most striking symbol is the transformation which one single substance can undergo, becoming successively liquid, gaseous, and then solid again; or, having been crumbly, becomes pliant like wax; or, losing its form in solution, it suddenly acquires a new one, this time crystalline; or, in changing its state, it acquires a new colour. This capacity for transformation on the part of one single substance symbolized more clearly than anything the one *materia prima* of the cosmos, capable of taking on all possible forms and states, without essential alteration. It also threw light on the nature of the soul, which likewise exhibits many states and properties, all in some way belonging to its (not immediately discernible) essence. Thus in the oven or retort of the alchemists, one can see in miniature Nature's 'play' (be it either in the corporeal or the psychic domain).

In interpreting material changes as the expression of a general law, the alchemists refer, on the one hand, to the four elements, and, on the other, to the four natural qualities hot, cold, wet, and dry, which, as nature's modes of action, are 'active' in their relation to the elements. The scheme of these relationships had already been expressed by Aristotle.

The four sensible qualities are thus 'mobile' in relation to matter, and seem, in fact, to have the capacity of changing one element into the next: thus it is by heat that water is absorbed into air; by cold that it freezes into ice and becomes similar to solid earth. In reality, however, it is not the elements which change, but corporeal *materia* which, under the influence of the sensible qualities, migrates through the 'elemental' states. In this connection it is really only heat and cold which act as motive forces, and, as the second quality is but a negation of the first, it is, in the last analysis, heat alone which is the origin of



the 'rotation'. It is the effect of fire alone that renders the substance in the alchemists' retort successively liquid, gaseous, fiery, and once again solid. Thus, it imitates in miniature the 'work' of Nature herself.

The scheme outlined above also has a meaning in regard to the soul; and here the qualities expansion, contraction, dissolution, and solidification take the place of hot, cold, wet, and dry. We shall return to this later. Mention has already been made of the correspondence between the four elements and states of the soul.

The 'speculative' value of this alchemy – in the ancient sense of *speculatio*, that is to say, a 'mirroring' of spiritual truths – rests on the fact that the observation of a single visible case can be a key to the grand rhythms of nature. The penetration into the invisible substratum of an individual substance, which modern chemistry has as its goal, does not contribute to this value, but on the contrary provides quite different data which do not facilitate a



total vision of the corporeal world and that of the soul. The content of the Hermetic vision of nature may be seen in the following words of Muhyi 'd-Dîn ibn 'Arabî: 'The world of nature consists of many forms which are reflected in a single mirror – nay, rather, it is a single form, reflected in many mirrors.'<sup>1</sup> The paradox expressed here is the key to the spiritual meaning of appearances.

It is not by chance that the scheme of elements and natural qualities ('modes of action') given above resembles the cosmic wheel, whose rim is the sun's orbit and whose spokes are the four cardinal directions.

Alchemically speaking, the hub of the wheel is the *quinta essentia*. By this is meant either the spiritual pole of all four elements or their common substantial ground, ether, in which they are all indivisibly contained. In order once again to attain to this centre, the disequilibrium of the differentiated elements must be repaired, water must become fiery, fire liquid, earth weightless, and air solid. Here, however, one leaves the plane of physical appearances and enters the realm of spiritual alchemy.

Synesios writes: 'It is thus clear what the philosophers mean when they describe the production of our stone as the alteration of natures and the rotation of elements. You now see that by "incorporation" the wet becomes dry, the volatile stable, the spiritual embodied, the fluid solid, water fiery, and the air like earth. Thus all four elements renounce their own nature and, by rotation, transform themselves into one another. . . . Just as in the beginning there was One, so also in this work everything comes from One and returns to One. This is what is meant by the retransformation of the elements . . .'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See my translation of the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, op. cit., p. 111 below.

<sup>2</sup> *Bibl. des phil. chim.*

## OF MATERIA PRIMA

According to the alchemists, the base metals cannot be transmuted into silver or gold without first being reduced to their *materia prima*. If the base metals are regarded as being analogous to one-sided and imperfectly 'coagulated' states of the soul, then the *materia prima*, to which they must be reduced, is none other than their underlying 'fundamental substance', that is to say, the soul in its original state, as yet unconditioned by impressions and passions, and 'uncongealed' into any definite form. Only when the soul is freed from all its rigidities and inner contradictions does it become that plastic substance on which the Spirit or Intellect, coming from on high, can imprint a new 'form' – a form which does not limit or bind, but on the contrary delivers, because it comes from the Divine Essence. If the form of a base 'metal' was a kind of 'coagulation', and thus a fetter, the form of a noble 'metal' is a true symbol, and as such an immediate link with its own prototype in God.

According to the alchemists, the soul, in its original state of pure receptivity, is fundamentally one with the *materia prima* of the whole world. In one way this is but a restatement of the theoretical premise of all alchemy, namely that macrocosm and microcosm correspond to one another. At the same time it is also an expression of the goal of the alchemical work. The unity of the soul with *materia prima* is truly 'lived' and known only to the extent to which the work has progressed along the road to its completion. – And here we touch on the real secret of alchemy, why everything that is said about it must of necessity remain no more than an indication and a symbol.

*Materia prima*, the fundamental substance of the soul (*psyche*), is in the first place the substance of the individual or ego-bound consciousness; then of all psychic forms, regardless of the individual beings; and finally of the whole world. All these interpretations are valid; for, if the 'web' of the world were not fundamentally of the same nature as that of the soul, every individual would be imprisoned in his own dream – which is absurd. Even if, in relation to the immutable Spirit, the world is a 'dream', the 'dream' is nevertheless consistent within itself. 'We are such stuff as dreams are made on', said Shakespeare in his Hermetic play *The Tempest*. The opposition of 'inward' and 'outward', of the world of the soul and the physical world, is woven into this dream.

Symbolically *materia prima* lies 'below', because it is completely passive, and it appears as 'dark', because, as the absolutely unformed, it eludes every advance of the intelligence. This is the source of the misunderstanding which confuses the *materia prima* of the alchemists with the 'collective unconscious' of modern psychology. *Materia*, however – unlike that ill-defined psychic domain – is not a source of irrational and more or less 'exclusively psychic' impulses, but, as has been said, the passive basis of all perceptions. Moreover, the word 'collective', with regard to what the psychologists have in mind, is contradictory. Either it means, from the etymological point of view, a collection of things – in this instance inherited psychic dispositions – in which case it is difficult to understand how there can here be any unity, since inheritance does not simply accumulate, but also ramifies; or else it is used inaccurately to mean 'general', in the sense of what is common to all men – but this is then the nature of the soul and body. In this case, however, it remains to be shown how the psychologist, who observes and assesses

the so-called 'collective unconscious' from above – in that he appears to make it the object of 'objective' study – does not himself think and act as a result of this 'collective' substratum. However one looks at it, his position remains that of the man who, sitting in a boat, wants to empty the sea.

One must make a distinction between, on the one hand, a more or less darksome layer of consciousness lying beneath everyday consciousness (which layer in any case cannot be completely unconscious in that it somehow does enter consciousness) and, on the other hand, the true, purely passive, and thus in itself unformed, ground of the soul. The darksome layer referred to (which resembles a sort of dusk, with a downward tendency towards denseness, rather than a completely dark night) is filled with the sediments of psychic impressions and behavioural modes. The true ground of the soul, on the other hand, is in itself neither dark nor light; nor is it a brooding volcano of irrational eruptions. On the contrary, when it is not completely veiled, and so apparently dark, it is the faithful mirror of its complementary pole, the Universal Spirit,<sup>1</sup> and thus of all truths, which, when the latent force of imagination approaches the pure condition of *materia prima*, occasionally express themselves in the form of symbols. This can occur in dreams, even if only seldom, for in general the picture-world of dreams is the playing of the most varied impulses; and as the soul, in the dream state, is at the mercy of every possible sort of influence, there can also be an 'impish' or even satanic distortion of symbols. Not the least of the dangers of modern 'depth psychology' is that it hopelessly confuses

<sup>1</sup> Analogously, *vox populi, vox Dei*, for the 'people' in the true sense of the word (a feature of the collectivity which the modern collectivity has more or less abolished) corresponds exactly to the true ground of the soul.

true symbols with their distortions. This happens, for example, when Far-Eastern *mandalas* are placed on the same level as the concentric paintings of the mentally ill.<sup>1a</sup> A true symbol is never 'irrational'. The 'supra-rational' must never be confused with the 'irrational'.

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In order to demonstrate that *materia prima* contains in potency all forms of consciousness and thus all forms of the ephemeral world, the ninth-century Arab alchemist Abu'l-Qâsim al-Îrâqî writes: '. . . *materia prima* is to be found in a mountain, which contains a measureless quantity of uncreated things. In this mountain is every kind of knowledge that can be found in this world. There is no knowledge, understanding, dream, thought, skill, interpretation, consideration, wisdom, philosophy, geometry, statecraft, power, courage, distinction, satisfaction, patience, discipline, beauty, inventiveness, travel, orthodoxy, leadership, exactitude, growth, command, authority, richness, dignity, counsel, or business, which is not contained therein. But also there is no hatred, malevolence, deceit, infidelity, illusion, tyranny, oppression, corruption, ignorance, stupidity, lowness, despotism, or excess, and no song, game, flute or lyre, or marriage, no jest, no arm, no war, neither blood nor homicide, which is not contained therein . . .'<sup>2</sup> The mountain in which *materia prima* is to be found is the human body, for the *reductio* to universal substance proceeds methodically from corporeal

<sup>1a</sup> As in C. G. Jung's introduction to Richard Wilhelm's German translation of the Taoist book *The Secret of the Golden Blossom* [*Das Geheimnis der goldenen Blüte*] (Munich, 1929). Some of the paintings of the mentally ill reproduced in this book and compared to *mandalas*, are real caricatures, in which childish imaginings of Oriental secret doctrines can be detected. Others are harmless and insignificant trifles.

<sup>2</sup> Text supplied by Dr S. Hussein Nasr, Teheran.

consciousness, which must first be 'dissolved' from within, before man can attain to the soul beyond the level of forms – and not merely indirectly through its sensory experiences. This explains Basilus Valentinus' interpretation of the alchemical key-word V.I.T.R.I.O.L.: *Visita interiora terrae; rectificando invenies occultum lapidem* ('Visit the interior of the earth; through purification thou wilt find the hidden stone'). The interior of the earth is also the interior of the body, that is, the inward, undifferentiated centre of consciousness. The hidden stone is here none other than *materia prima*.

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From the 'inward' point of view, the 'reduction of metals to their primary substance' has nothing to do with a somnambulistic immersion of consciousness in the "unconscious". The 'reduction' occurs only after arduous combat against the conflicting tendencies of the soul, whereby all irrational 'knots' or 'complexes' must from the first be dissolved. The alchemical work is not a treatment for mental illness.

On passing from differentiated to undifferentiated consciousness, there intervenes a darkness, corresponding to chaos. This is the condition of *materia* no longer in possession of its original purity, but whose differentiated possibilities are still confused and disordered. Such is the condition of 'raw material'. If, however, consciousness goes on to reach a deeper level, it perceives the mirror of the ground of the soul, which, though not graspable in its 'substantial' reality, nevertheless reveals its nature – and this is to reflect, untrammelled, the light of the Intellect. The chaos of the soul was like lead. The mirror of the ground of the soul is like silver. It is also comparable to a pure spring. It is the mythical fountain of youth,

from whose depths springs forth the mercury-like water of life. This is the meaning of the following account by the alchemist Bernardus Trevisanus:

'It happened that one night I had to study with a view to a disputation the following day. However, I found a little fountain, beautiful and clear, and completely surrounded by a beautiful stone. The stone lay on the trunk of an old hollow oaktree, completely surrounded by a wall, so as to prevent cows and other irrational animals – and even birds – from bathing in the fountain. As I was very sleepy, I sat down on the edge of the fountain, and I saw that it was also covered in above, and thus completely enclosed.

'There came along, however, an aged priest, and I asked him why this fountain was completely closed in, above, below, and on all sides. He was kindly towards me, and began to answer me thus: "Sir, the truth is that this spring possesses a terrible power, greater than any other on earth. This power is only for the king of the land, whom it knows well, and who knows it. For two hundred and eighty-two years the king has bathed himself with this power in this spring. In doing this the king rejuvenates himself so much, that no man can conquer him . . ."

' . . . On hearing this I returned secretly to the fountain, and began to open all the locks (which all worked perfectly). Then I began to look at the book which I had won (at a disputation) and to enjoy its great splendour. But as I was very sleepy, it fell into the fountain, causing me to grieve exceedingly, as I had wished to keep it, since it was a prize of honour. So I began to look (into the fountain) until my sight gave out. I then began to empty out the fountain, and I did this so well and so carefully that soon only a tenth part remained – apart from the other ten, which, in spite of my energetic activity, remained as one

mass. As I thus laboured, people suddenly came . . . and, for my transgression I was imprisoned for forty days. When, after these forty days, I left prison, I went again to look at the fountain. There I saw black and dark clouds, which remained for a long time. Finally, however, I saw everything that my heart desired, and I had no trouble about it. And you also will have none, if you do not get lost on a bad and misleading path, neglecting those things which Nature requires . . .'<sup>8</sup>

■

The alchemists give *materia prima* – which they regard as both the primary substance of the world and the basic substance of the soul – a large number of names. The object of this multiplicity is not so much to protect Hermetism from the unqualified, as to underline the fact that this *materia* is contained in all things, and that likewise it contains all things. They call it 'sea', because it carries within it all forms, as the sea the waves, or 'earth' because it nourishes all that 'on it' lives. It is the 'seed of things', the 'basic moistness' (*humiditas radicalis*), the *hyle*. It is 'virgin' on account of its infinite purity and receptivity and 'meretricious', because it seems to cling to every form. It is also compared, as we have seen, to the 'hidden stone', although in its primordial condition it is to be distinguished from the 'philosophers' stone', which is the fruit of the whole work. *Materia prima* can be considered as 'stone' only in that it remains immutable. Its designation 'stone' recalls the Persian *gohar* and the Arabic *jawhar*, which means literally 'precious stone', and in a metaphorical sense is used to mean 'substance' (Greek *ousia*).

<sup>8</sup> From *Le Livre du Trévisan de la philosophe naturelle des métaux* in *Bibl. des phil. chim.*

*Materia prima* is also the 'ore deposit' of all 'metals'. From another point of view, however, it is man who is called the 'ore deposit', from which the *materia* of the work has to be extracted, as Morienus explained to King Khalid: *Haec enim res a te extrahitur; cuius etiam minera tu existis* ('This thing is extracted from you, for you are its mine').

In its chaotic condition, which is neither pure and formable, nor endowed with clear-cut forms, *materia* is called a 'common thing', for, as 'raw material', it is to be found everywhere. Yet, at the same time, it is a 'very precious thing', because from it the elixir is obtained with which one can make gold. Raw material, which in comparison with *materia prima* represents a *materia secunda*, is compared with lead (in which the nature of gold is hidden), or with ice (that must be melted), or with a field (that only brings forth fruit when it has been ploughed and sown). Henrich Kunrath says: '... the sodden, moist, fat, and muddy earth of Adam, *materia prima*, from which this large world, we ourselves, and our powerful stone were created, makes its appearance ...'<sup>4</sup>

As a tree, *materia prima* is one with the tree of the world, whose fruits are sun, moon, and planets. On the 'tree' of *materia* grow gold and silver, or all metals, or again the various phases of the alchemical work with their symbolical colours, black, white, and red, and sometimes also yellow, between white and red. Abu 'l-Qāsim al-Īrāqī writes of such a tree, that has its roots, not in earth, but in the world-sea. Here 'sea' is the *materia* of the soul, *anima mundi*. The tree grows in the 'lands of the West', thus of the setting sun, for *materia* corresponds to the West, just as *forma*, the essential prototype, corresponds to the East. The 'tree' can take on the form of a living creature, for it is the inward form of man. From it is obtained the

<sup>4</sup> Henrich Kunrath, *Theatrum sapientiae aeternae*.

*materia prima* of the work, for in the fruit the origin of the tree itself lies hidden.

'*Materia prima*, which can produce the form of the elixir, is obtained from one single tree, which grows in the 'lands of the West'. It has two branches, which are too high for anyone who would eat its fruit to reach without labour and effort, and two others whose fruit is drier and more wrinkled than that of the former. The flower of the first of the two branches is red, and the flower of the second is between white and black. The tree has two further branches, which are weaker and softer than the first four. The flower of the first of these two branches is black, and that of the second is white and yellow. This tree grows on the surface of the ocean, just as other plants grow on the surface of the earth. Whoever eats of this tree, is obeyed by both men and genii (*jinn*). It is the same tree as that which Adam – may peace be upon him! – was forbidden to eat. When he did eat of it, he was transmuted from an angelic form into a human form. This tree can transmute itself into the form of any living creature ...'<sup>5</sup>

The *materia prima* of the alchemists is thus both the origin and the fruit of the work. For the chaos of *materia* is dark and opaque only so long as the forms contained in it – and already 'budded' – do not attain their full development. Every 'potency' (*potentia*) is in essence impenetrable. This is so in the case of a mineral which appears dull and opaque in its amorphous condition, but which, the moment it takes form as a crystal, is clear and transparent. However, it must not be concluded from this that all possibilities fundamentally present in the soul will necessarily be manifested, for in the first place their multiplicity is inexhaustible, and secondly the very variety of the soul's contents is an obstacle to the realization of its

<sup>5</sup> Text provided by Dr S. Hussein Nasr, Teheran.

essential 'form', that is, the unitary and harmonious state of consciousness which is the perfect mirror of the 'Divine Act'. Thus the true nature of *materia prima* reveals itself to the extent to which it receives or takes on true form. Just as universal substance (*materia prima*) can only be grasped by means of knowledge of Pure Being, whose shadow it is, so also the true ground of the soul can only be known in its response to the pure Spirit. The soul only uncovers itself when united as bride to the Spirit-Intellect. This is what is referred to when one speaks of the marriage of sun and moon, of king and queen, of sulphur and quicksilver.

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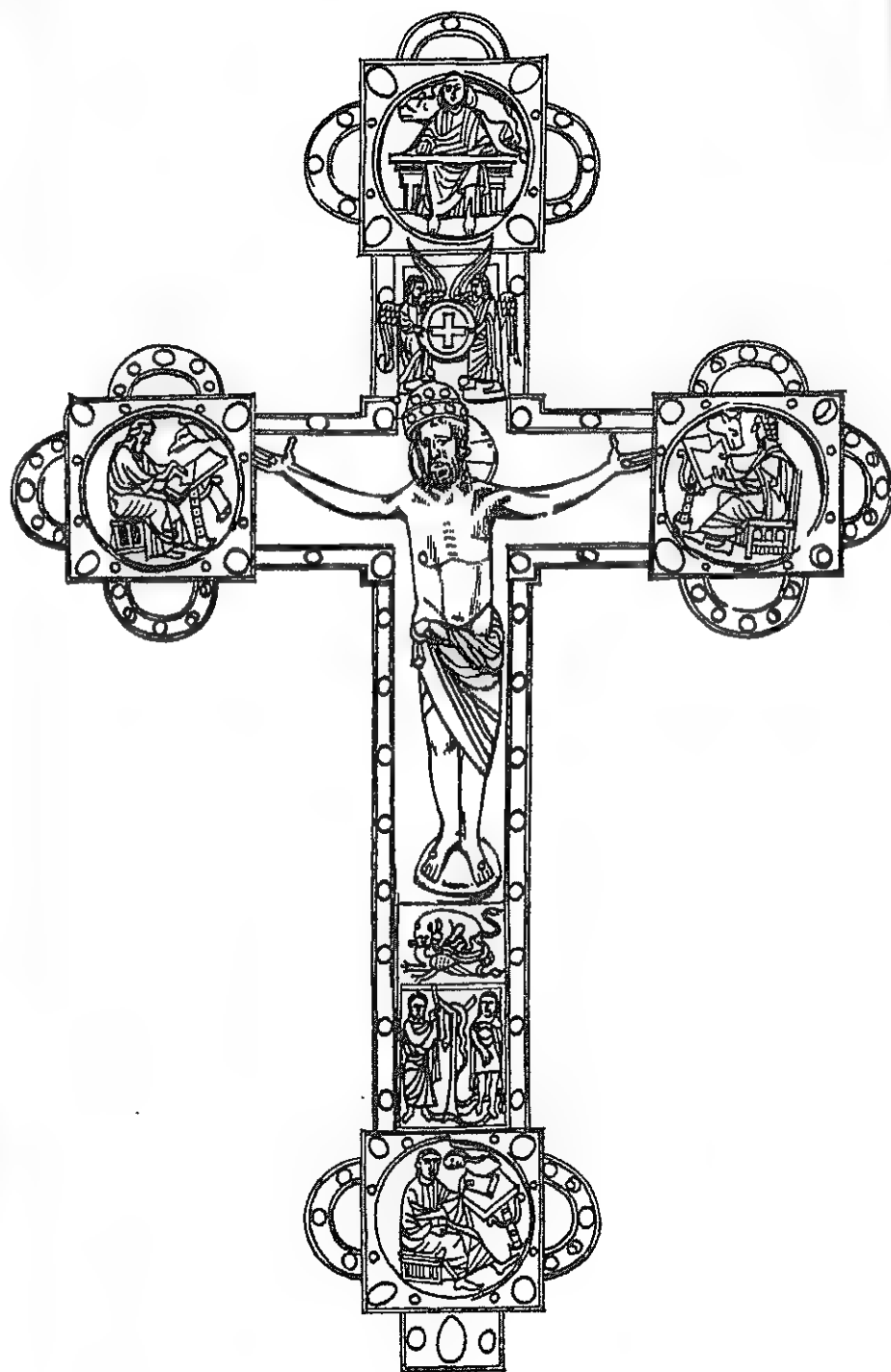
The 'uncovering' of the receptive ground of the soul and the 'revelation' of the creative Spirit take place at the same time. They cannot be separated from one another. Nevertheless the various phases and aspects of the inward work can be referred to one or other pole. Every way of spiritual realization envisages the preparation of a receptive 'stuff' or substance, and the 'working' or influence of the spiritual or divine Act upon it. Depending on the way followed, however, the emphasis – doctrinal as well as practical – will lie either on one or other of the two inward processes, and, in view of this, the spiritual goal will either be set on the 'immobile Act' or on the immutable and pure ground of the soul. The artisanal symbolism of alchemy, which consists in the 'ennobling' of a mineral substance, requires that the soul be conceived as a 'substance', and also that the idea of a 'first substance' (*materia prima*) stand at the centre of all considerations. Even the effect of the transcendent Intellect, which is 'antipodal' to the 'stuff' of the soul, is, in the symbolic language of alchemy, expressed 'substantially', as a

chemical transmutation. The fact that this transmutation exceeds purely artisanal possibilities indicates its more-than-substantial origin.

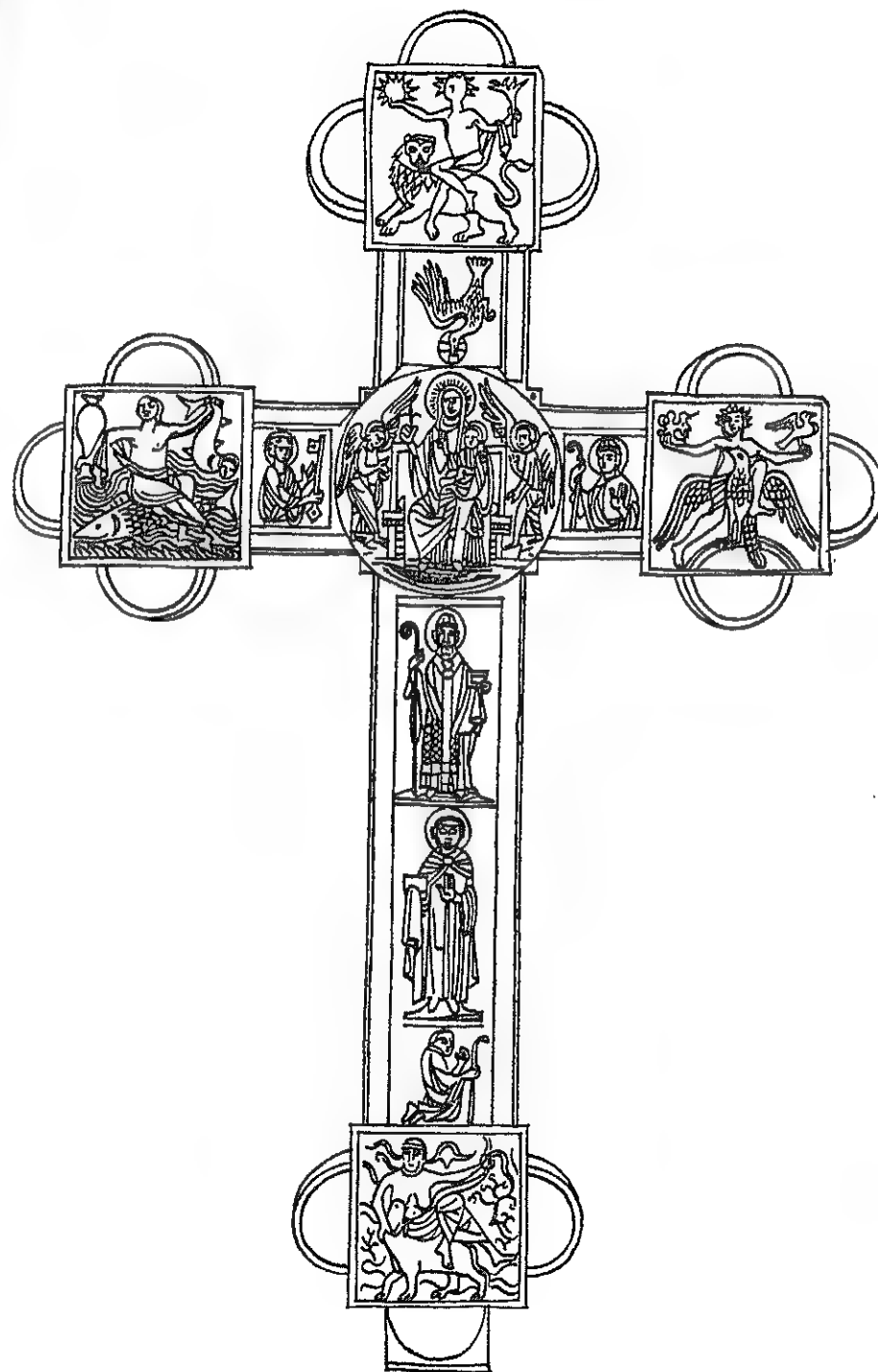
The two aspects or phases of spiritual realization are clearly illustrated in a certain traditional form of the crucifix decorated with symbols. As an example of this, we select a silver reliquary cross of the beginning of the thirteenth century, which is conserved in the Monastery of Engelberg, and whose decoration proves that alchemy has been linked with the art of the goldsmith. The crucifix is decorated with pictures on both front and back. The front (recognizable by its deeper relief) carries in the centre the figure of the crucified Saviour, and, on the extremities of its four arms, representations of the four evangelists, along with their animal symbols. This was a very widespread composition in the Christian art of the Middle Ages, but here it appears in a relatively 'naturalistic' form. In the older liturgical crosses the figure of Christ or the Lamb is surrounded by the four celestial animals alone, which confers on the symbolism a greater rigour and at the same time a greater breadth. In a similar manner, the back of the crucifix shows, in the centre, the Holy Virgin, enthroned, with the Christ-Child, and on the four arms the signs of the four elements. Fire is above, air on the right (of the beholder), water on the left, and earth below.

The two sides of the cross can be regarded as representations of the 'essential' and the 'substantial', of the 'active' and the 'passive', of the *forma* and the *materia* of the cosmos: the front, bearing the human figures of the Divine Word and Its four 'revelatory modes' (the evangelists) clearly corresponds (in its relation to the symbolism of the reverse side) to the Divine Act or 'essential form', of the cosmos. The reverse side, on the other hand, corresponds





*Reliquary cross of Heinrich von Wartenbach. Ca. 1200.*



*Same cross. Reverse side.*

to *materia prima*, or rather, to the world which proceeds therefrom. The Virgin, in the centre, symbolically assumes the role of ether, which, from a certain Hermetical point of view, is to be identified with *materia prima*. The four elements, for their part, manifest the four fundamental determinations of *materia prima*, and thus also the four foundations of the whole formal world. The inviolate equilibrium of *materia prima*, its 'virginal' nature, is made clear by the central position given to the Virgin, relative to the four signs of fire, air, water, and earth.

It is unnecessary to add that this cosmological interpretation of these Christian images in no way detracts from their theological meaning. On the contrary, the co-incidence of two spiritual 'perspectives' in one and the same symbol confers on it an even greater import – from both points of view. It reveals all the more clearly its truly metaphysical content, and provides a foretaste of the completely unlimited possibilities of pure contemplation, which are open to an artisan or artist experienced in the Hermetic art and at the same time rooted in the Christian faith.

The intrinsic connection between the two symbolic compositions – to be found respectively on the front and back of the cross – finds expression in the Dove of the Holy Spirit, shown descending towards the Virgin, and in the Christ-Child present on her lap. The dove represents the presence of the uncreated Spirit, under whose influence *materia prima* undergoes formal development, just as, under His shadow, the Virgin conceives and brings forth. As a Child, born of her, the Divine Spirit takes on form. He remains the same in essence, but clothes himself in substance given to Him by His mother. He adapts Himself to the differentiated aspects of matter.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Thus, according to the doctrine of the Islamic mystics, the revelation

The form of the cross itself, which expresses the law of the whole cosmos, is to be found in each of the poles. At one and the same time it corresponds to the fourfold revelation of the Eternal Word, and to the two pairs of opposites contained in *materia prima*. Thus, every spiritual work proceeds both from the essential Act and from Its 'substantial' recipient. The soul cannot be transmuted without the co-operation of the Spirit, and the Spirit illumines the soul only to the extent of its passive preparedness and in accordance with its manner. The opposition between the two poles is overcome only on the highest level, in pure Being. Here the receptive 'substance' itself is none other than a first, immediate, and inward determination of the Divine Spirit, who thus descends only into that which is already his, taking on its form and manner.<sup>7</sup>

The interpretations given for the images described above can be supplemented by various other details. Thus each of the four arms of the cross has at the end three semicircles. In this way the fourfold groups of evangelists and elements are increased to the twelvefold groups of apostles and zodiacal signs. On the front of the cross, angels hold a circle above the head of Christ, whilst on the back, pictures of St Peter and of various holy bishops surround the figure of the Virgin. In these two dispositions may be recognized the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies, which, according to St Dionysius the Areopagite, face one another respectively giving and receiving.

Further details refer even more explicitly to alchemy.

(*tajallî*) of God in the heart takes on the form which the readiness of the latter confers on it. See my translation of the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* by Muḥyi 'd-Dīn ibn 'Arabī: *La Sagesse des prophètes*, published by Albin Michel, Paris, 1955.

<sup>7</sup> Dante has this truth in mind, when he calls the Blessed Virgin 'Daughter of thy Son' (*figlia del tuo figlio*). (*Paradiso*, beginning of Canto 33.)



*The cross of Christ growing as a blue lily out of the Holy Virgin, who kneels on the crescent moon. The lily with five petals corresponds to the Quintessence, and the Mother of God corresponds to materia prima. From a miniature in the alchemical Book of the Holy Trinity in the Staatsbibliothek, Munich.*

On the trunk of the cross one can see Moses erecting the pole with the bronze snake. This is both an Old Testament prototype of the Crucifixion and a symbol of the alchemical fixation of quicksilver. The same process is also expressed in the group of animals in combat immediately beneath the feet of the crucified Christ. Certainly the first and most immediate meaning of this group

is the victory of the lion of Juda over the infernal dragon, but the same picture can also be interpreted as the subduing of 'volatile' quicksilver by the solar lion of sulphur.

There is a Far-Eastern parallel to this Christian iconography, which, even though far removed in space and time, serves all the more strongly to reinforce the universal validity of the symbolism in question. We have in mind a certain form of *mandala* which is used in Japanese *Shingon*, one of the branches of *Mahayana* Buddhism. The *mandala* consists of a banner painted on both sides. On one side is a representation of the 'world of the indestructibles' or of the 'diamantine elements', and on the other is a representation of the 'womb-element'. In the centre of both sides is one of the forms of manifestation of the 'Great Enlightener', the Buddha Mahāvairochana, sitting on a lotus. In the first representation – that of the immutable prototypes – the Buddha has a contemplative mien. His head is surrounded by a white halo. In the second representation he is portrayed emerging from an open lotus, and with a red halo, the symbol of activity. This means that here the 'substantial' pole is regarded in its dynamic aspect, corresponding to the Tao-Buddhistic doctrine regarding the active essence of non-action and the passive essence of action. Meditation on the first-mentioned representation leads to the knowledge of the way of deliverance from becoming, while meditation on the second has as its fruit the knowledge of the five cosmological sciences.<sup>8</sup>

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The interpretation of *materia prima* as mirror of the Uni-

<sup>8</sup> See: E. Steinilber-Oberlin, *Les Sectes bouddhiques japonaises*, Paris, 1930.

versal Spirit is also to be found in the Far-Eastern symbolism of the mirror. Chinese ritual or magic mirrors usually have, on their reverse side, a representation of a celestial dragon. This corresponds to the Universal Spirit or Logos. In Shinto, the pre-Buddhist religion of Japan, the sacred mirror (which reflects the image of the Sun-Goddess Amaterasu) is obviously also a symbol of the soul in the state of spiritual purity, in which it may receive and reflect Truth – supra-conceptual, original Truth. This brings us back to the Hermetic assimilation of *materia prima* with the ground of the soul.

Rather surprisingly, the same symbolism may also be found amongst certain of the North American Indians, namely, the Crows and the Shoshonis. Here the mirror is indeed a magic mirror, by means of which a shaman can find things which have been lost or forgotten. (He sees them in the depths of the mirror.) On the surface of the mirror a red zigzag line is painted, representing lightning, which, for the Indians, is the symbol of the Great Spirit, and of Revelation, just as is also (for the Indians) the eagle planing in the heavens, and swooping down like lightning.

## CHAPTER 8

### UNIVERSAL NATURE

An important adage of the alchemists ran as follows: 'Art is the imitation of nature in her mode of operation.' The model for the alchemical work is nature. Nature comes to the aid of the 'artist' who has mastered her mode of operation, and perfects, in her 'play', what he has begun with labour and effort. The expression 'nature' has here a very precise meaning. It does not simply mean the involuntary 'becoming' of things, but rather a unitary power or cause whose essence may be known by perceiving its all-embracing rhythm – a rhythm which rules both the outward and the inward world.

As Western alchemy in general uses the language of Platonic metaphysics, one must refer to the latter in order to appreciate fully all that the expression *natura* or *physis* includes. The most meaningful description of nature is to be found in the *Enneads* (III, 8) of Plotinus, where he writes: 'If one should ask nature why she produces her works, she would answer as follows – if indeed she condescended to answer at all: It would be more fitting not to ask (i.e., not to probe with the mind), but to learn silently, even as I am silent. For it is not my way to speak (in contradistinction from the Spirit who reveals Himself in words). But this shalt thou learn, that everything that becomes is the object of my silent vision, a vision that is my original possession, for I myself arise from a vision (namely, the vision of the "universal soul", which contemplates the Universal Spirit, even as the latter contemplates the Infinite). I love contemplation, and that which in me contemplates immediately engenders the object of its contemplation. Thus the mathematicians

write down figures as a result of their contemplation. I however write down nothing. I only watch, and the forms of the material world arise, as if they proceeded from out of me . . .'

Thus nature, in her receptive essence, is related to *materia prima*; and indeed, alongside *materia prima* (*hyle*), she is situated below the three cognitive hypostases of the Platonic universe. Above her is the 'universal soul' (*psyche*), and above the latter is the Universal Spirit (*nous*), who alone contemplates the ineffable One, and contemplating It, seeks to manifest it endlessly. Below nature is *materia prima* alone, the passive foundation of all manifestation, which itself does not participate in becoming, and thus remains eternally 'virgin'. One could call nature the maternal aspect of *materia prima*, since it is she that 'gives birth'. She is operative and mobile, whereas *materia prima* in itself remains motionless.

Muhyi 'd-Dîn ibn 'Arabî, the 'greatest master' (*ash-sheikh al-akbar*) of Islamic mysticism, and the greatest enunciator of Hermetic principles, conceives of universal nature (*tabî'at al-kull*) as the feminine or maternal side of the creative act. She is the 'merciful "breathing-out" of God' (*nafas ar-rahmân*), which confers differentiated existence on the undifferentiated possibilities latent in 'non-being' (*'adam*). This 'breathing-out' is merciful, for the possibilities which are to be manifested, are already longing for manifestation; but the same power also has a darksome and confusing aspect. Multiplicity as such is deception and separation from God.<sup>1</sup>

Ibn 'Arabî's explanation of universal nature as a kindly and maternal, but at the same time, confusing, power of divine origin, is here of especial importance, for it constitutes a bridge towards the Hindu idea of *shakti*, the

<sup>1</sup> See my translation of the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, op. cit.

feminine-productive power of God. On this idea of *shakti* are based all those tantric spiritual methods which are more closely related to alchemy than to any other of the spiritual arts. The Hindus, indeed, regard alchemy itself as a tantric method.

As Kâlî, the *shakti* is on the one hand the universal mother, who lovingly embraces all creatures, and on the other hand the tyrannical power which delivers them over to destruction, death, time, and space (which causes separation). She is sometimes depicted as having sublime beauty, sometimes as having features which cause terror. Her colour is dark, like her 'ungraspable' essence. The *shakti* is also *mâyâ*, the divine art, which confers on beings their multiple forms and thereby also alienates them from their one and infinite origin.

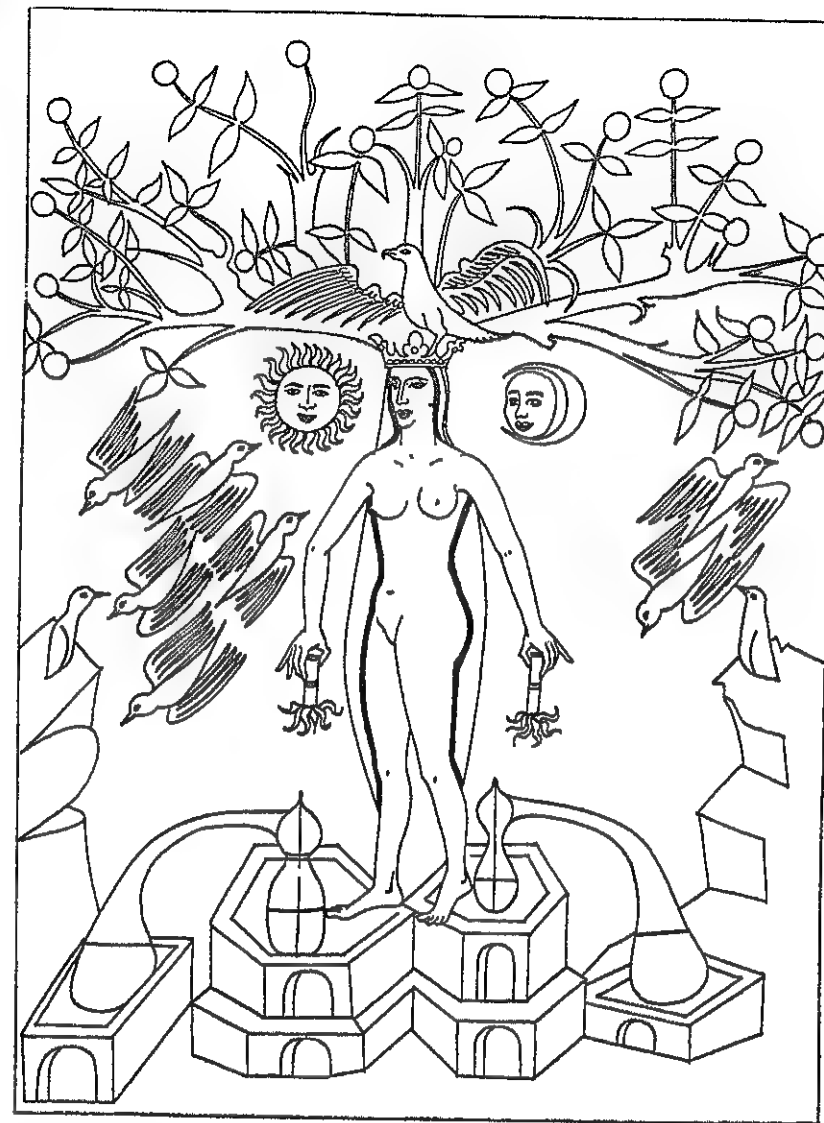
This way of regarding the divine creative power may appear to spring from a standpoint somewhat different from that of scholastic theology, and yet it does not contradict the latter, for the view that existence is both a divine gift and also (from the point of view of pure being) a limitation, is also to be found in the classical ontology taught by the Church Fathers.

The particularity of the conception described here, which combines the metaphysic of an Ibn 'Arabî with the Hindu doctrine of *shakti*, is that it refers both aspects of existence (or 'becoming'), the positive as well as the negative, to one and the same root-cause, namely, to universal nature, which is depicted as being both maternal and terrible. In contradistinction from the *personal* action of God, which is the real object of theology as such, His action or operation in the world is here represented in *impersonal* mode. This corresponds entirely with the special viewpoint of alchemy – which is not for this reason agnostic, although the concept of 'nature', as used and misunder-

stood by the philosophers of the 'Enlightenment', indirectly derives from the Hermetic *natura*. That this *natura* should have become, with the secularization and desacralization of the sciences, a vague and non-committal substitute for God, was not entirely unconnected with a concomitant narrowing of the theological horizon, which rendered more difficult a simultaneous vision of both the 'personal' and 'impersonal' aspects of God's revelation of Himself.

With regard to the outward work of alchemy, nature is the driving power behind all transmutations – the 'potential energy' of things. In inward alchemy she appears as that maternal power which releases the soul from its fallow, arid, and sterile existence. Thus she is the power of desire and longing in man, and at the same time much more, for, as inexhaustible potency, 'nature' develops all the capacities hidden in the soul, against or in keeping with the desires or the ego, depending on whether the latter assimilates the power of nature, or becomes its victim. She is always feminine – both as Dame Nature and also in her terrible aspect as the Great Dragon which roams through all things.

According to one interpretation (associated with the name of 'nature' even to this day), nature always has something of a compulsion about her. This marks an essential difference between her and the freely operating human will. She possesses this aspect also in alchemy, at least in one connection, because, from a certain stage of the work onwards, this compulsion is transmuted into a cosmic rhythm, which does not bind, but liberates. Dante called this 'the love which moves the sun and the other stars'. Psychologically speaking, that which at the beginning of the work appears as a dangerous and disturbing impulse, becomes, with the achievement of mastership, a



*Nature, as woman and tree, comes out rejuvenated from the two distilling retorts sun and moon. The birds are the 'seed' of gold and silver. The two directions of their flight represent respectively 'solution' and 'coagulation'. – From the 'Alchemical Manuscript' of 1550 in Basle University Library.*



force carrying the consciousness into higher spheres. This is a law present in all true *ascesis*, distinguishing it from puritanism, for in true spirituality it is not a question of destroying the natural forces but rather of taming them, so that they become vehicles of the Spirit. That alone which must be destroyed is the egoistic tendency, which deforms the genuine essence of these powers. The latter, in fact, is neither good nor evil in itself, but naturally innocent. One speaks commonly of 'sublimation', thus borrowing an alchemical expression for a psychological process – which, however, is completely powerless to overcome certain tensions on a purely profane basis, and without the help of a sacred art or of grace. One can only speak of a cosmic extension of the powers of the soul in connection with a genuine spiritual art; for something cosmic (and, indirectly, divine) must first enter man – by means of the revealed symbol and its faithful application – before he may loose himself from mere arbitrariness and attain true freedom. It is in this light that one must regard certain exercises which imitate the rhythms of nature, such as, for example, the regulation of the breath – a procedure which was probably known to alchemy. The latter is not an automatic technique, but something which can serve the goal of spiritual realization only on the basis of certain outward and inward conditions. In the same category are a number of special means – dubious at first glance and at all events dangerous – for awakening the inward power, such as the contemplation of Dame Nature in the beauty of the feminine body – a method which is practised both in *tantra* and in Hermetic chivalry.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See: Maurice Aniane, *Notes sur l'alchimie, 'yoga' cosmologique de la chrétienté médiévale* in *Yoga, science de l'homme intégral*, Cahiers du Sud, Paris, 1953, and J. Evola, *Metafisica del sesso*, Atanòr, Rome, 1958.

One may well wish to ask whether the familiar distinction between 'natural' development and the 'supernatural' operation of grace has any meaning at all for the Hermetic way of looking at things. To this the answer is in the negative, in the sense that the working of grace does not fall outside universal nature, and, in addition, always has repercussions within the natural order in the narrower sense. Nevertheless the distinction is justified when one considers any given level of nature, whose relative subjection to 'compulsion' can always be overcome by grace, which irrupts suddenly and without constraint, like lightning. Thus the expression 'nature' embraces, from case to case, a greater or lesser domain of reality.

An anonymous alchemical text entitled *Purissima Revelatio*<sup>3</sup> calls nature a 'book' in which only he who has received illumination from God may read. It is also called 'a very thick wood into which many have penetrated in order to try and wrest its holy secrets from it. But they have been swallowed up, because they did not have the light weapons which alone could conquer the terrible dragon protecting the golden fleece. And those who were not killed, had to retrace their steps, gripped by terror and covered in shame and disgrace. Nature is also that measureless sea on which the Argonauts set out. Woe to sailors who do not know our art! For they may travel their whole life long without ever reaching harbour. They will find no refuge from the frightful storms. Burnt by the sun and frozen by icy winds they will undoubtedly perish, unless they implore the help of the most high and mighty Lord . . . For it is not given to many to reach the shore of Colchis . . . Only the wise Argonauts, who strictly observe the laws of nature and are completely devoted to

<sup>3</sup> French translation by Robert Buchère in *Le Voile d'Isis* (Paris), Vol. for 1921, p. 183.

the will of the Almighty, can win the precious golden fleece, which Medea, the personification of nature, will yield up, against the order of her darksome father and to the great anger of the surprised dragon . . .' Medea is an image of the 'dark' side of nature. Universal nature, like *Máyá*, has two directions or movements – one which tends away from the spiritual centre towards multiplicity (and which in man is linked with passion), and one which, from multiplicity, leads back towards the spiritual centre. The former is here likened to Medea, and the latter to Sophia or wisdom. Both are feminine in relation to the human will, being either mistress or bride: '. . . And woe to him who, like Jason, having conquered with the help of Medea, lets himself be seduced by his dangerous conquest and submits to nature the sorceress, instead of remaining constant and true to his divine bride, wisdom. On the other hand, happy is he who, affianced to wisdom, knows how to seduce that sorceress nature, in order to attain to her secrets, which she no longer can withhold from him, and who returns home, possessor of the golden fleece, and true to his virtuous betrothed . . .' Like the tantric methods, the alchemical work awakens a terrible natural power, which destroys the unprepared and the unqualified, but which raises the wise to spiritual supremacy. This power lives in man, but its name indicates that it is not something individual and ego-bound, but a part or aspect of an impersonal and endless rhythm. This is the only unfalsified interpretation which has been conserved in the expression 'nature'.

# 'NATURE CAN OVERCOME NATURE'

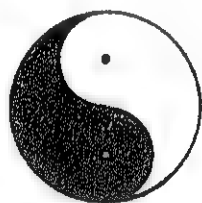
In the world of forms Nature's 'mode of operation' consists of a continuous rhythm of 'dissolutions' and 'coagulations', or of disintegrations and formations, so that the dissolution of any formal entity is but the preparation for a new conjunction between a *forma* and its *materia*. Nature acts like Penelope who, to rid herself of unworthy suitors, unwound at night the wedding garment which she had woven during the day.

In this way too the alchemist works. Following the adage *solve et coagula*, he dissolves the imperfect coagulations of the soul, reduces the latter to its *materia*, and crystallizes it anew in a nobler form. But he can accomplish this work only in unison with Nature, by means of a natural vibration of the soul which awakes during the course of the work and links the human and cosmic domains. Then of her own accord Nature comes to the aid of art, according to the alchemical adage: 'The progress of the work pleases nature greatly' (*operis processio multum naturae placet*).

The two phases of Nature – dissolution and coagulation – which seem opposed from a superficial point of view but which in reality are mutually complementary, can in a certain sense be related to the two poles, essence and substance, though these of course are not present within Nature as a pure opposition of Activity and Passivity, but merely as relative reflections of the latter. Within Nature it is alchemical Sulphur which corresponds to the active pole, and alchemical Quicksilver which corresponds to the passive pole. Sulphur is relatively active; it is Sulphur which confers form. Quicksilver resembles passive

*materia* and is thus more immediately linked with Nature herself and her feminine character. Since Sulphur represents the essential pole in its natural refraction, it can be said to be active in passive mode, while Quicksilver, in view of the dynamic character of Nature, can be said to be passive in active mode. The relation of the two primordial forces to each other is thus similar to that of man and woman in sexual union.

The best symbol for the couple Sulphur-Mercury is the Chinese device of *Yin-Yang*, with the black pole in the white vortex and the white pole in the black vortex, as an indication that the passive is present in the active, and the active in the passive, just as man contains the nature of woman, and woman the nature of man<sup>1</sup>:



In the soul Sulphur represents the essence or spirit, whereas Quicksilver corresponds to the soul itself in its receptive and passive role.

According to Muhyi 'd-Dîn ibn 'Arabî, who always has the highest interpretations in mind, Sulphur corresponds to the 'Divine Command', that is to say, to the *fiat lux* by means of which the world became a cosmos out of chaos, while Quicksilver represents Universal Nature, the passive counterpart of the former.<sup>2</sup> Thus, even although within the specific realm of alchemy the two poles appear as more or less conditioned forces, it is highly useful to remember

<sup>1</sup> This has not merely a psychological, but also and above all an ontological, basis.

<sup>2</sup> *Futûhât al-Mekkiyah*.

their unconditioned prototypes, as only by so doing can one understand, for example, in what respect Sulphur corresponds to the spiritual will, and Quicksilver to the 'plastic' capacity of the soul. In an immediate sense, and in its general psychological interpretation, the spiritual will proceeds from an ideal and endeavours to form the soul in accordance with this. In its original essence, however, which reveals itself only within the framework of a traditional spiritual art, the spiritual will is a vibration coming from the centre of the being, a spiritual act which breaks through thought and which on the plane of the soul effects two things: a broadening and a deepening of the 'sense of being', and a clarification and a stabilization of the essential contents of consciousness. In accordance with this, the 'plastic' capacity of the soul, which responds to the original Act of the Spirit, is not merely the passive imagination that takes on and develops forms, but a capacity which gradually extends beyond the confines of the individual consciousness bound to the body.

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Sulphur, the original masculine power, and Quicksilver, the original feminine power, both strive towards the wholeness of their one and eternal prototype. The latter is at the same time the reason for their opposition and of their mutual attraction – just as the masculine and feminine natures long for the integrality of the human state, and as a result of this seek both to separate from one another, and to unite with one another. By means of their physical union both try to re-establish the image of their common eternal prototype. This is the marriage of man and woman, sulphur and quicksilver, Spirit and soul.

In the mineral domain it is gold that is born of the perfect union of the two generative principles. Gold is the true

product of metallic generation. Every other metal is either a premature birth or an abortion, an imperfect gold, and, in this way of looking at things, the alchemical work is nothing other than a midwife or helper, which art offers nature, so that the latter can perfectly ripen the fruit whose maturation was being hindered by certain temporal circumstances.<sup>3</sup> This can be understood both in the mineral and in the microcosmic sense. Muhyi 'd-Dîn ibn 'Arabî regards gold as the symbol of the original and uncorrupted state (*al-fitrah*) of the soul, the form in which the human soul was created at the beginning. According to the Islamic conception the soul of every child unconsciously approaches this Adamic state, before being led away from it again by the errors imposed on it by adults.<sup>4</sup> The uncorrupted state possesses an inward equilibrium of forces. This is expressed by the stability of gold.

According to a widely held cosmological view – already mentioned by Aristotle – Nature is characterized by four properties, which are manifested on the sensory level by heat, cold, humidity, and dryness. Heat and dryness are associated with Quicksilver. The first two properties thus have a masculine and predominantly active character, whereas the last two have a feminine and more passive character. What this means can be seen more clearly when one relates heat to expansion, cold to contraction, humidity to dissolution, and dryness to coagulation.

The heat, or power of expansion, proper to Sulphur, causes the growth of a given form from its essential centre,

and this force of Nature is closely connected with life. The dryness of Sulphur coagulates or 'fixes' a *forma* on the level of its *materia*, so that it imitates the immutability of its prototype in a passive and material way. Put another way, Sulphur's power of expansion is the dynamic – and therefore relatively passive – aspect of the essential Act, and coagulation is the inverse or lower aspect of the immutability of Essence. Pure Act is motionless and True Essence is active. The coldness, or power of contraction, of Quicksilver opposes the coagulating power of Sulphur, in that it surrounds forms from the outside, as it were, and holds them fast, like a cosmic womb.<sup>5</sup> The moist and dissolving character of Quicksilver, however, resembles feminine receptivity, which, like water, can take on all forms, without thereby being altered.

The four natural properties or 'modes of operation', which are related in pairs to Sulphur and Quicksilver, can, in their successive coagulations and dissolutions, enter into a variety of combinations with one another. Generation only takes place when the properties of Sulphur and Quicksilver mutually penetrate each other. When sulphurous dryness joins one-sidedly with mercurial coldness, so that coagulation and contraction come together (without the action thereon of the expansive heat of Sulphur or the dissolving humidity of Quicksilver), a complete *rigor* of soul and body ensues. In terms of life, this is the torpor of old age, and on the ethical level, avarice. More generally and more profoundly, it is the wrapping up of the ego-consciousness in itself, a mortal condition of the soul which has lost its original receptivity and vitality, both spiritually and sensually. The other way

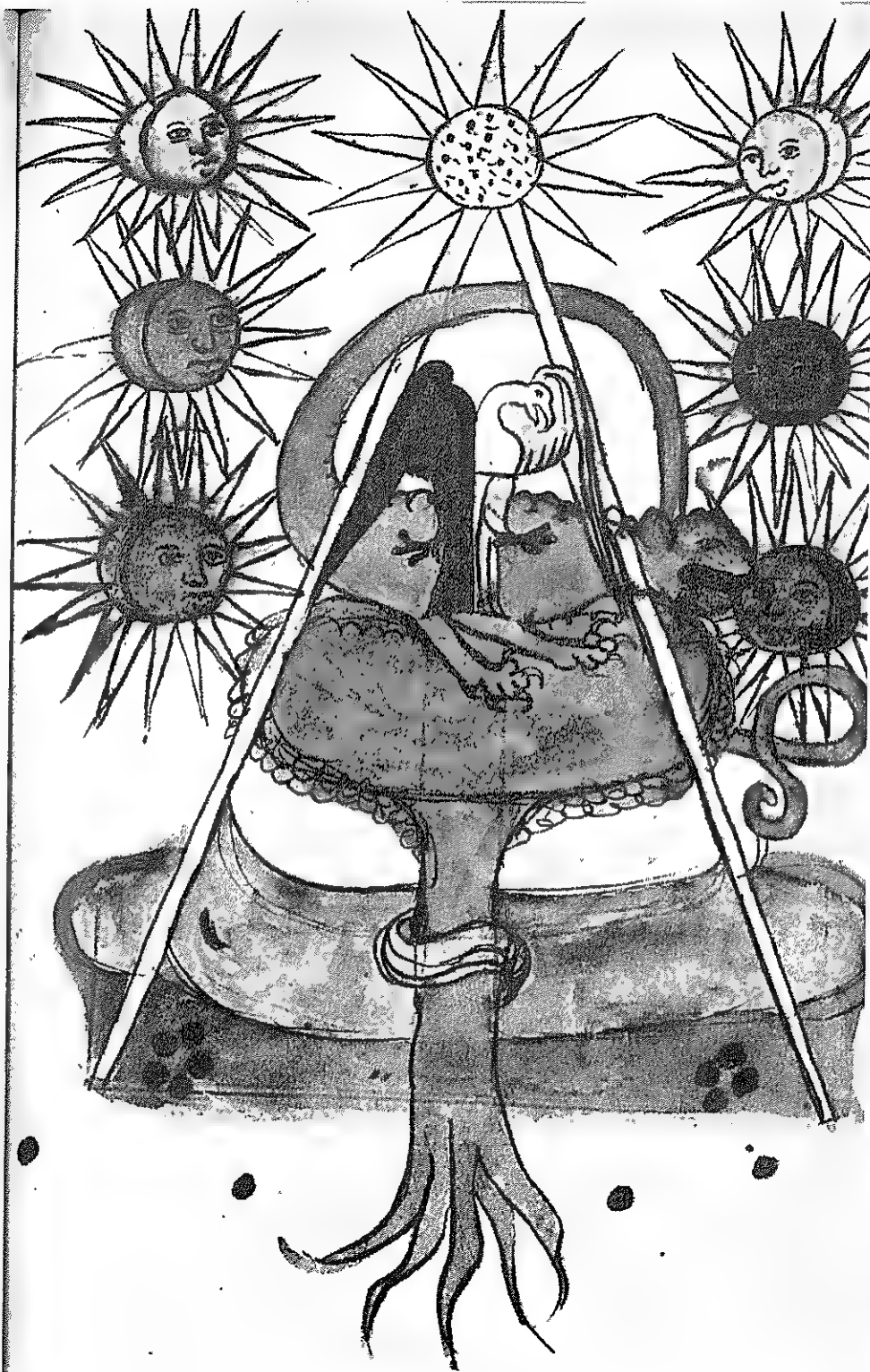
<sup>3</sup> The most recent discoveries in the realm of nuclear fission seem to confirm that the qualitatively lowest metals are the most unstable. Uranium closely resembles lead.

<sup>4</sup> This doctrine is not to be confused with the opinion of J.-J. Rousseau that man is good in himself. The unconscious recapitulation of the primordial state in the child does not exclude negative tendencies or hereditary defects.

<sup>5</sup> On the contracting power of Quicksilver, see René Guénon, *La Grande Triade*, published by La Revue de la Table Ronde, Paris, 1946. Chapter entitled 'Soufre, mercure et sel'.

round, a one-sided conjunction of heat and humidity (i.e., expansion and dissolution) results in a volatilization of powers. It resembles the condition of consuming passion, vice, and dissipation of spirit. Characteristically, the two types of disequilibrium are usually to be found together. One begets the other. The numbing of the powers of the soul leads to dissipation, and the fire of a passion lived out regardlessly brings inward death. The soul which is avaricious with itself and closes itself to the Spirit, is carried away in the vortex of dissolving impressions. Creative equilibrium is only produced when the expansive power of Sulphur and the contractive power of Quicksilver hold the balance, and when, at the same time, the masculine coagulating power enters into a fruitful union with the feminine dissolving capacity. This is the true marriage of the two poles of being, which are represented *inter alia* by the intersecting triangles of the Seal of Solomon ☆ – the sign which also symbolizes the synthesis of the four elements. The applications of this law are quite unlimited; only a few psychological and ‘vital’

Plate 5 SYMBOLICAL REPRESENTATION OF THE ALCHEMICAL WORK. *The dragon of chaos or untamed nature rests on the tree of psychic materia prima which has its roots in the earth of cosmic materia prima. The seven suns correspond to the seven metals, planets and phases of the work. From the sun at the top of the picture there emerge two rays which represent the male and female powers. Between them is poised the double-eagle of male-female Quicksilver. It is black, white, yellow and red and so unites in itself the four main colours of the work. In a certain sense the dragon is the initial and the eagle the final form of Quicksilver. – From the alchemical manuscript MS 428 of the Vadian Library, St Gallen.*







consequences have been mentioned here. It might also be added that traditional medicine is founded on the same principles, the four elements then corresponding to the four humours.<sup>6</sup>

The soul, in her entire breadth, as unfolded in the course of the alchemical work, is governed by the two fundamental forces Sulphur and Quicksilver which slumber, in the 'chaotic' state of the unawakened soul, like the fire in flint and the water in ice. When they awake, they first of all manifest their opposition in a certain outward tension. From this tension they continue to grow, the one on the other, and, to the extent that they become free, they embrace one another, in that they are related to one another as man and woman. To these two phases of their development are related the first two clauses of the Hermetic formula: 'Nature takes delight in Nature; Nature contains Nature, and Nature can overcome Nature.' The last clause means that the two powers, when they have so grown that one can embrace the other, reunite on a higher plane, so that their opposition, which previously had bound the soul, now becomes a fruitful complementarism, by means of which the soul achieves

<sup>6</sup> To air corresponds the red constituent of blood, to fire yellow bile, to water phlegm, and to earth black bile. All four humours are contained in the blood.

Plate 6 'AQUILA VOLANS et bufo gradicus sup. Terra est magisterium.' The soaring eagle represents the liberated, 'spiritual' part of the alchemical materia, and the toad its darksome but fertile dregs. The crescent moon corresponds to the purified soul while the snake wound in a knot is the symbol of the latent power of Nature. From the manuscript Egerton 845 in the British Museum. Fifteenth-sixteenth century.



dominion over the entire world of psychic forms and currents. Thus Nature as a liberating force, overcomes Nature as tyranny and entanglement.



When the immutable Divine Act which governs the cosmos, is symbolically represented by a motionless vertical axis, the 'course' of Nature, in relation to it, is like a spiral, which winds itself around this axis, so that with each encirclement it realizes a new plane or degree of existence. This is the primordial symbol of the serpent or dragon, which winds itself round the axis of the tree of the world.<sup>7</sup> Almost all the symbols of Nature proceed from the spiral or the circle. The rhythm of the successive 'unrollings' and 'rollings' of Nature, of the alchemical *solve et coagula* is represented by the double spiral: ☯, whose form also lies at the basis of the zoomorphic representations of the *Shakti*. Also related to this is the representation of two serpents or dragons winding themselves in contrary directions round a staff or tree. These correspond to the two complementary phases of nature or the two fundamental forces.<sup>8</sup> This is the ancient heritage of images of nature on which both alchemy, and certain traditions of the East (especially tantrism) draw.

It should also be noted here that the use of a serpent or dragon as the image of a cosmic power is to be found in all parts of the world. It is especially characteristic of those traditional arts, such as alchemy, which are concerned with the subtle world. A reptile moves without legs and by means of an uninterrupted rhythm of its body, so that it is the incorporation, so to say, of a subtle oscillation. Furthermore, its essence is both fiery and cold, conscious

and elemental. The resemblance in question is so real that most if not all traditional cultures have regarded serpents as the occasional carriers of subtle or psychic powers. One need only think of the serpent as the guardian of tombs in Western and Far-Eastern antiquity.

In *laya-yoga*, a spiritual method belonging to the realm of tantrism, whose name signifies union (*yoga*) achieved through solution (*laya*), the awakening of the *Shakti* within the human microcosm is compared with the awakening of a serpent (*kundalinī*), which until then had remained coiled up in the subtle centre known as *mūlādhāra*. According to a certain correspondence between the subtle and corporeal orders this centre is located at the lower end of the vertebral column. *Kundalinī* is awakened by certain exercises in spiritual concentration, by means of which it gradually ascends, in spiral fashion, the spiritual axis of man, bringing into play even wider and higher states of consciousness, until it finally restores the plenitude of consciousness in the supraformal Spirit.<sup>9</sup> In this representation, which must not be conceived literally, but as a symbolical – though logical and consequential – description of inward processes, one will again recognize the image of Nature or *Shakti* twining round the world-axis. That the developing power should come 'from below' is in keeping with the fact that potency (*potentia*) – like *materia prima* – in its passivity represents the 'base' of the cosmos, and not the summit.

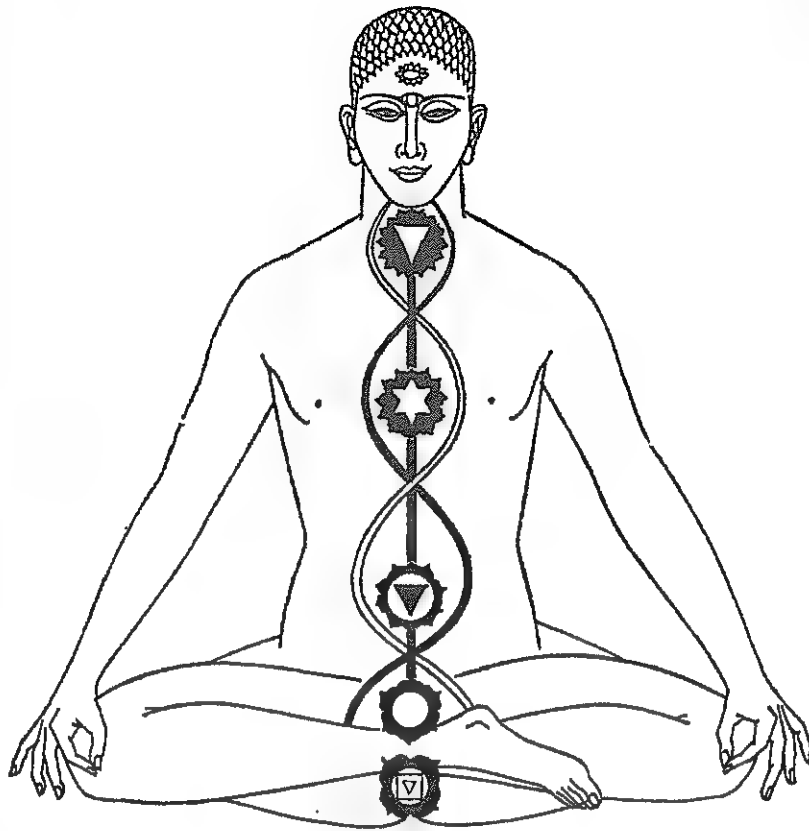
In the Hermetic tradition, Universal Nature in her latent condition is likewise represented as a coiled up reptile. This is the dragon Uroboros which, curling into a circle, bites its own tail.

Nature in her dynamic phase, on the other hand, is portrayed by means of the two serpents or dragons, which,

<sup>9</sup> See Arthur Avalon, *The Serpent Power*, Madras, 1931.

<sup>7</sup> See René Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*.

<sup>8</sup> See René Guénon, *op. cit.*



*The seven 'shakras' or power centres in the subtle body of man, with the two power-streams 'Ida' and 'Pingala', which wind round the central axis. Tantric representation from The Serpent Power by Arthur Avalon. The leaf design on the head represents the highest shakra: 'the lotus with the thousand petals'.*

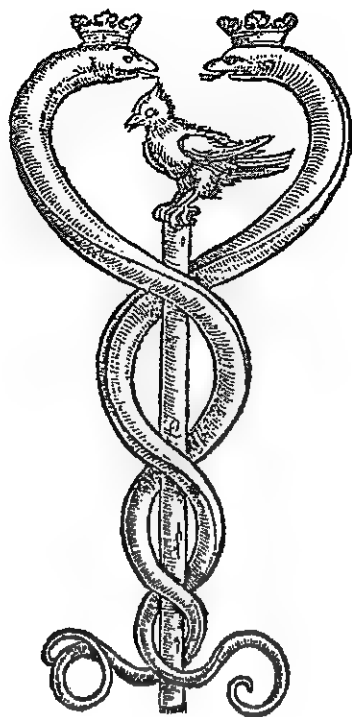
in the form of the well-known model of the staff of Hermes or caduceus, wind themselves round an axis – that of the world or of man – in opposing directions. This duplication of the primordial serpent has also its counterpart in *laya-yoga*, for *Kundalinī* is likewise divided into two subtle forces, *Idā* and *Pingalā*, which in opposite directions wind themselves round *Merudanda*, the microcosmic prolongation of the world-axis. At the beginning of the spiritual

work, the *Shakti* is present in this divided form, and only after the two forces are activated alternately by means of a form of concentration based on breathing, does *Kundalinī* awake from its sleep and start to ascend. As soon as it has reached the highest threshold of ego-consciousness, the two opposing forces become completely dissolved in it. For alchemy the two forces represented as serpents or dragons are Sulphur and Quicksilver. Their macrocosmic prototype is the two phases – increasing and decreasing – of the sun's annual course, separated from one another by the winter and summer solstices.<sup>10</sup> The connection between the tantric and alchemical symbolisms is obvious: of the two forces *Pingalā* and *Idā*, which wind themselves round the *Merudanda*, the first is described as being hot and dry, characterized by the colour red, and, like alchemical Sulphur, compared with the sun. The second force, *Idā*, is regarded as being cold and humid, and in its silvery pallor is associated with the moon.

In his book *On the Hieroglyphic Figures* Nicolas Flamel writes of the mutual relationship of Sulphur and Quicksilver: '... these are the two serpents which are fixed around the caduceus, or Staff of Mercury, and by means of which Mercury wields his great power and transforms himself as he wills. Whoever kills one, says Haly,<sup>11</sup> also kills the other, for each one of them can only die along with her sister [by means of their death both pass over into a new state] ... After both have been placed in the "vessel" of the grave [that is to say, the inward, "hermetically sealed" vessel], they begin to bite one another savagely, and, on account of their great poison and raging fury, do not let go of each other – unless the cold should deter them – until both, as a result of their dripping

<sup>10</sup> See Julius Schwabe, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> Probably the Arab name 'Ali.



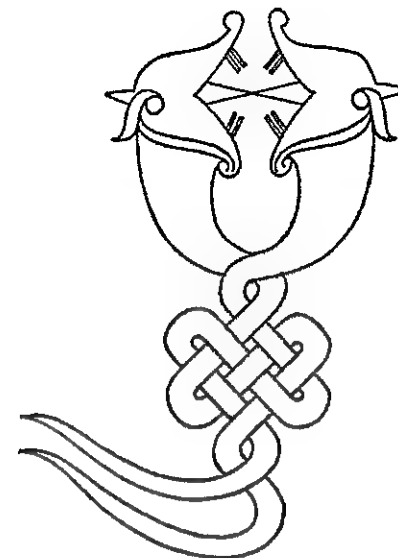
*The staff of Hermes, or caduceus, from a drawing by Hans Holbein the Younger.*

poison and deadly wounding, are drenched in blood [for so long as Nature remains “untamed”, the opposition of the two forces is manifested in destructive or “poisonous” mode], so that they finally kill one another and drown in their own poison, which, after their death, will transmute them into living and perpetual water [in that they are reunited on a higher level], after they have lost, with their downfall and decomposition, their first, natural forms, in order to acquire a single, new, nobler and better form . . .’<sup>12</sup>

This fable supplements the Hermetic myth of the Staff of Hermes. Hermes or Mercury struck with his staff a pair of serpents in combat with one another. The blow

<sup>12</sup> The unformed, or amorphous, is the opposite of the formless, or supraformal. The latter does not lack form, it possesses it essentially, without being limited by it. For this reason the supraformal – that is, the pure Spirit – can only be realized by means of a perfect form.

*Pair of dragons from an Arab talisman.*



tamed the serpents, which wound themselves round his staff and conferred on him the theurgic power of ‘binding’ and ‘loosing’. This means the transmutation of chaos into cosmos, of conflict into order, through the power of a spiritual act, which both discriminates and unites.

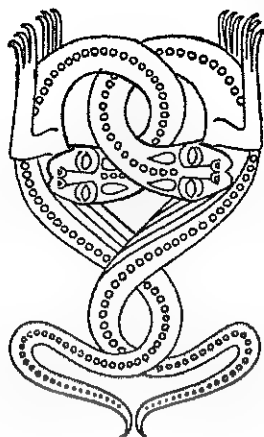
In the Jewish tradition, as a counterpart to the Staff of Hermes and the Hindu symbol of *Brahma-danda*,<sup>13</sup> we find Moses’ rod, which indeed turns itself into a serpent. In Islamic mysticism Moses’ rod, which ‘on God’s command’ turned into a serpent, and on being ‘grasped’ by Moses turned back into a rod, is compared with the passional soul (*nafs*), which through the influence of the Divine Spirit can be turned into a wonder-working power. Because it incorporates a spiritual power, Moses’ rod, turned into serpent, can vanquish the serpents engendered by the Egyptian sorcerers and made of magic – and therefore psychic – power; for the Spirit prevails over the soul and its domain.<sup>14</sup> This interpretation of the story

<sup>13</sup> See René Guénon, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> See my translation of the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, chapter on Moses.



Pair of dragons from the Romanesque choir of Basle Cathedral.



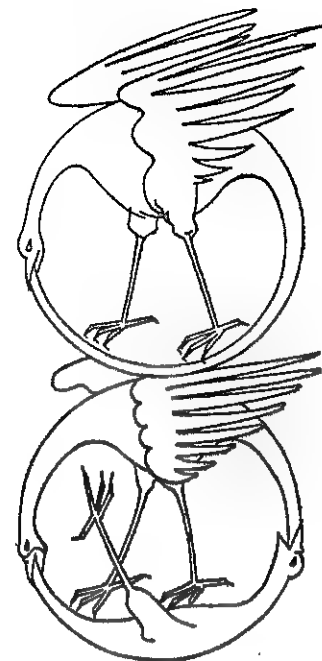
Romanesque form of the caduceus on the main door of St Michael's Church in Pavia.

of Moses' rod mentioned in the Koran recalls the Hindu distinction between *vidyā-māyā* (Universal Nature in her 'enlightening' aspect) and *avidyā-māyā* (Universal Nature as the power of illusion). In this distinction, however, is also to be found the deepest sense of the Hermetic proverb: 'Nature can overcome Nature.' From the alchemical point of view the changing of Moses' rod into a serpent and its subsequent resolidification corresponds exactly to the *solve et coagula* of the great work.

In medieval Christian art there is a representation of the Staff of Hermes which Flamel's fable brings vividly to mind. The image of a pair of serpents or dragons entwined together and biting one another was already common in early Irish-Anglo-saxon art. In Romanesque sculpture it occurs so commonly and plays such a striking role in the decoration of sacred buildings,<sup>15</sup> that one might readily conclude that it was a kind of 'signature' of certain Christian-Hermetic schools. Moreover, the same motif is connected with the symbol of the knot, whose cosmological meaning lies in the fact that the harder one pulls

<sup>15</sup> In fact this motif is to be found in almost all Romanesque churches.

From an alchemical manuscript of 1550 in Basle University Library.



on the knot, the more firmly its two constituents hold together. This illustrates *inter alia* the mutual paralysis of the two forces when in a state of 'chaos'.<sup>16</sup>

Sometimes one of the two reptiles representing Sulphur and Quicksilver is winged, whereas the other is without wings. Or, instead of two reptiles, there are a lion and a dragon in combat. The absence of wings always refers to the 'firm' nature of Sulphur, whereas the winged animal, be it a dragon, a griffin, or an eagle, represents 'volatile' Quicksilver.<sup>17</sup> The lion, which conquers the dragon, corresponds to Sulphur, which 'fixes' Quicksilver. A winged lion, or leogryphon, can represent the union of the two natures, and has the same meaning as the image of the male-female androgyne.

<sup>16</sup> This explains the role of knots in magic.

<sup>17</sup> See Senior Zadith, *Turba Philosophorum*. *Bibl. des phil. chim.*

Finally, the dragon alone can represent all phases of the work, depending on whether it is provided with feet, fins, or wings, or is without any limbs whatsoever. It can be considered as able to live either in water, air, or on the earth, and, as a salamander, even in fire. The alchemical symbol of the dragon thus closely resembles that of the Far-Eastern world-dragon, which first lives as a fish in water, and then, as a winged creature, soars into the heavens. It also recalls the Aztec myth of Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent, which successively moves under the earth, on the earth, and in the heavens.

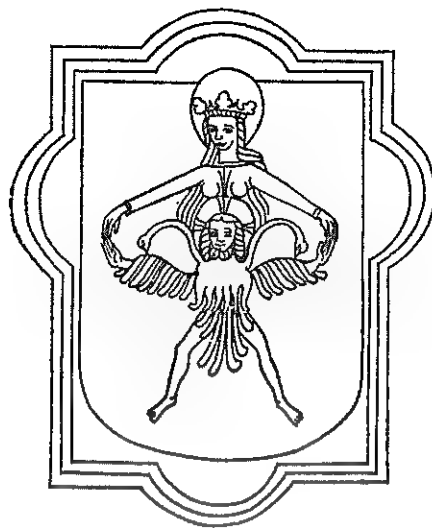
All these correspondences with the animal images of alchemy have been mentioned in order to show how a cosmological wisdom of the most general bearing is reflected in alchemy, in a particular way and within specific limits.

## SULPHUR, QUICKSILVER, AND SALT

It is in virtue of their nature and of the part they play in the metal worker's craft that the two chemical substances normally called Sulphur and Quicksilver are taken as the symbols of the two basic generative forces. They act on metals, but are themselves volatile 'spirits'. Quicksilver in particular can be either solid, liquid, or gaseous. It belongs to the 'bodies', to the metals, and to the 'spirits'. The 'masculine' character of Sulphur can be seen in its 'fieriness', and also in the fact that it can 'fix' and 'colour' volatile Quicksilver. The combination of the two produces cinnabar. 'Colouring' by Sulphur corresponds to the conferring of form.

Common quicksilver exhibits a great 'desire' to combine with related metals. With quicksilver, metal workers can make gold and silver liquid. Quicksilver amalgam has been used since early times to gild metal objects. After application of the liquid amalgam, the quicksilver can be eliminated by fire, and the gold remains. Gold can also be extracted from other minerals by washing with quicksilver. The meaning of the alchemical *solve et coagula* can already be seen in this artisanal example, as also the decisive role of spiritual fire.

According to the same simile Quicksilver bears in itself the 'germ of the sun', just as the primordial sea of *materia prima*, which the Hindus called *prakriti*, contains the golden egg of the world – the *hiranyagarbha* of the Indian myth. On the plane of the soul the primordial sea is none other than the *anima mundi*. Quicksilver, which animates and dissolves the inward 'metal', is in a sense the surf of this primordial sea, which, as the mother of all things, remains



*Christ in the form of the double-eagle of quicksilver emerging from the Holy Virgin (materia prima). From an alchemical manuscript of the sixteenth century. Vadiana Library, St Gallen.*

ungraspable. For this reason Quicksilver is also known as 'maternal blood' (*menstruum*), for, when it does not flow 'outwards' and perish, it nourishes the germ in the alchemical womb or 'athanor'.

Having in mind the fact that Sulphur in a certain sense corresponds to the Spirit and Quicksilver to the soul, confusion may arise from the fact that almost all the alchemists call Quicksilver a *spiritus* ('spirit'), while some of them (for example, Basilus Valentinus) compare Sulphur to *anima* ('soul'). This contradicts what has been said above only in appearance; for in the language of these authors *anima* signifies the immortal soul, thus the essential and immutable 'form' of man, while the expression *spiritus* does not mean the transcendent spirit or *intellectus agens*, but the 'vital spirit', that subtle power which unites the individual soul with the body and the corporeal world as a whole. The vital spirit corresponds

to Quicksilver because it is only partially and loosely attached to the sphere of the ego, and thus represents a still formable *materia*. The Arabic expression *rûh* can also have the same meaning. It is used in this sense by the cosmologists, regardless of the fact that the same word also designates the metaphysical spirit. The reason for this double meaning may be that *spiritus* like *rûh* (and also the Hebrew *ruah*) recalls the movement of the air or the breath (the Arabic for 'wind' is *rîh*). On the one hand this can represent the creative breath of the Universal Spirit and on the other the mobility of the 'vital spirit' and its connection with the subtle 'atmosphere' of this world. The 'vital spirit' extends throughout cosmic 'space'. It is taken in by beings as is the air in breathing. It is the constant nourishment of the subtle 'body' of their vital powers.

The Hindus call this power *prâna*. Certain North American Indian tribes call it *orenda*.<sup>1</sup> It can be fixed by means of a spiritual art. For the Hindu *Shaivas* it is the *Shakti*.

If on the basis of the alchemical descriptions one seeks to determine what exactly is meant by Quicksilver, whether it belongs to the realm of the body or of the soul, whether it has merely a subjective or also a cosmic bearing, one can easily lose every leading thread, if one does not know that it lies in the essence of alchemy – as also of other similar methods – always to approach the soul's domain from its corporeal landmarks, and the Universal from its concrete, existential traces.

On the corporeal level, Quicksilver is present in blood and semen. On a somewhat higher level – intermediate between body and soul – it is in the heart and in the breath.

<sup>1</sup> See Paul Coze, *L'Oiseau-Tonnerre*, Paris-Geneva, 1938. According to Averroes, who bases himself on Galen, the vital spirit is a pure substance present in stellar space, which is assimilated by means of a process similar to breathing, and is changed into life in the heart.



The latter is so to say the bearer of the 'substance' of the soul. Its rhythm is the image of the 'solidification' of this substance within the field of force of the ego-consciousness, and of its eventual dissolution in the All. The substance of the soul, for its part, is the bearer of a spiritual reality.

According to the Chinese master Ko Ch'ang-Kêng,<sup>2</sup> who incorporated alchemy into Dhyâna (Zen) Buddhism, the action of Quicksilver can be conceived of in three ways: according to the first conception, Quicksilver is the heart, which is made liquid by meditation (*dhyâna*) and fiery by the sparks of the Spirit, while lead, which it can transmute, corresponds to the body. According to the second conception, Quicksilver is the soul, and lead the breath, and according to the third Quicksilver is the blood and lead is the semen. In each case Quicksilver has the role of the dissolving and animating element. In the last analysis it is the substance which 'flows' in all psychic and mental forms. The Hindu alchemists call Quicksilver the 'semen of Shiva'. Shiva is God as Author of all transmutation.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the reader will ask how one can in any way prove what, in inward alchemy, is reality, and what mere imagination. The criterion of this lies in alchemical realization itself, which in the last analysis does not add any new content to human consciousness, but rather uncovers its very substance, which precedes all experiences. For want of a better expression one can call this 'the acquiring of a consciousness of being'. Being is neither 'objective' nor 'subjective', but includes both or stands above both. Consciousness of being is also of necessity a knowledge of unity, for *unum et esse convertuntur*.

<sup>2</sup> See Mircea Éliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, chapter on Chinese alchemy.

<sup>3</sup> See Mircea Éliade, op. cit., chapter on Indian alchemy.

In the first instance Quicksilver is only a manifestation of *materia prima*. In the last analysis, however, it is *materia prima* itself. In Fra Marcantonio's book *The Light which Proceeds from Darkness* it is said, 'I know well that your secret Quicksilver is nothing other than a living, omnipresent and innate spirit which, in the form of an aery haze (a subtle influence) continually descends from heaven to earth (and to earthly man), in order to fill earth's porous body. I know that it is subsequently born among the impure Sulphurs (the corporeal substances), so that, having had a volatile nature, it may acquire a firm (i.e. immutable) one, and that by doing this it takes on the form of primordial humidity (*humiditas radicalis*) . . .'<sup>4</sup>

Sulphur has apparently two contradictory aspects: as the formative cause it effects in the first place the coagulation of the 'substance' or 'body' which is to be transmuted, and thus also its dryness and hardness. It thus appears as a hindrance to purification, and only when the 'substance' has been completely dissolved out of its coagulation, does Sulphur reveal itself as the creative cause of the new and 'noble' form. The dissolution is brought about by Quicksilver. Thus in the first instance the latter works at cross purposes with Sulphur, wresting the 'substance' from the former, in order subsequently to offer 'herself' to 'him' as a newer, unlimited and more receptive substance. From the psychological point of view, this is the same as when the attraction of feminine nature dissolves masculine nature from its torpor and at the same time calls forth, as a result of the tension between the two poles, its truly masculine and active power. There is a tantric method which operates this alchemical process by increasing the natural attraction between man and woman to the most

<sup>4</sup> *Bibl. des Phil. Chim.*

extreme degree, and then spiritually revaluating it, similarly to the Fedeli d' Amore (to whom Dante belonged), who also knew and practised such a method.<sup>5</sup> In the *Chemical Marriage of Christian Rosenkreutz* by Johann Valentin Andreae the following allegory is related: a beautiful unicorn, white as snow, wearing a golden collar, approaches a fountain and kneels down, bending his forelegs, as if he wished to honour the lion standing on the fountain. This lion, which at first, because of its immobility, seems to be of stone or ore, immediately seizes a shining sword that it had been holding under its paws, and breaks it in two. Both parts fall into the fountain. Then it roars unceasingly, until a white dove with an olive branch flies towards it. The dove gives the lion the olive branch. The lion devours it and is silent. The unicorn returns with a few happy jumps to his place. The snow-white unicorn, a lunar animal, is Quicksilver in its pure state. The lion is Sulphur, which at first, as the essential form of the body, seems as rigid as a statue. It is awakened by the homage of Quicksilver and begins to roar. Its voice is its creative power. According to the *Physiologos* the lion brings its still-born sons to life by means of its voice. It breaks the sword of reason, and the fragments of the latter fall into the fountain, where they dissolve. The lion only falls silent again after the dove of the Holy Spirit has given him to eat the olive branch of Divine Knowledge.

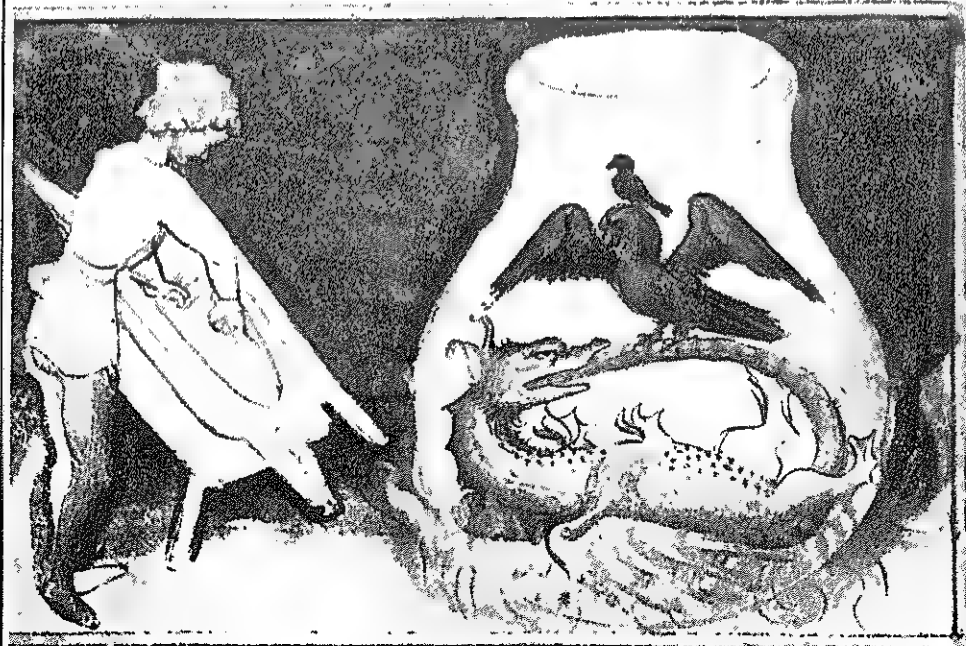
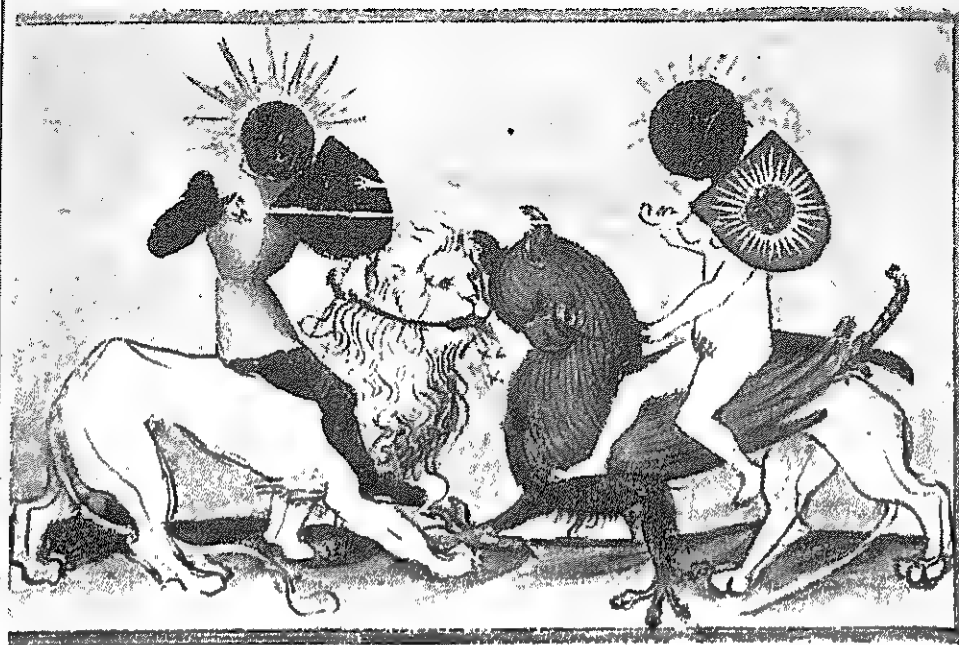
In a certain sense, 'rigid' Sulphur is theoretical under-

<sup>5</sup> See Julius Evola, *Metafisica del sesso*.

red and white to give white  
the married nature of spirit

work  
of life





standing. This contains the gold of the Spirit in unfruitful form. It must first be dissolved in Quicksilver before it can become a living 'ferment' which can transmute other metals. That is to say, it must be liberated from its conceptual limitations, and become wholly 'active'.

The dissolving and disintegrating power of Quicksilver has a terrible aspect. It is the 'poisonous dragon' which devours everything; it is the water which makes one shudder and which brings the presentiment of death. Artephius writes: 'The whole secret lies in our knowing how to extract non-burning Quicksilver from the body of Magnesia . . . , that is to say, one must extract a living and incombustible water and then coagulate it with the perfect body of the sun, which dissolves in this water into a white creamy substance, until everything is white. At first, however, the sun will lose its splendor, be extinguished, and become black, as a result of the putrefaction and dissolution (*resolutio*) which it undergoes in this

Plate 8a THE STRUGGLE OF THE TWO PRIMORDIAL POWERS: *The male power has the sun as his head and rides on the lion of sulphur; the female has the moon as head and rides on the griffin of quicksilver. The shield decorations, however, are inverted: on the shield of the solar power the moon is portrayed, and on that of the lunar power the sun. From the alchemical manuscript Ph. 172 of the graphic collection of the Central Library, Zurich.*

Plate 8b REPRESENTATION OF THE ALCHEMICAL WORK: *First of all the raw material is kneaded in the tub like dough, and then 'boiled' in the Hermetic vessel. The dragon, which is devouring its tail, represents the still unredeemed power of nature; the eagle is the 'spirit' in course of liberation; on his head sits the raven of mortification. From the same manuscript.*

water . . .<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, however, Quicksilver is the 'water of life' (*aqua vitae*) and the spring in which sun and moon, spirit and soul must bathe in order to be rejuvenated. All this is also said of *materia prima*, for Quicksilver is its most direct psychic manifestation and all epithets applicable to the former can also be transposed to the latter. Synesius writes: ' . . . lay aside what is mixed and take up the simple, for the latter is the quintessence of the former. Remember that we possess two very perfect bodies (gold and silver, spirit and soul, heart and brain), which are both filled with Quicksilver. Extract our Quicksilver from them, for from it you will make the medicine called quintessence, because it possesses an enduring and ever-victorious power. It is a living light which illumines every soul that has ever seen it. It is the knot and the bond of all elements which are contained in it, just as it is also the spirit that nourishes and animates all things, and through which Nature acts in the cosmos. It is the power, the beginning, the middle and the end of the work. And to tell you everything in few words, my son, know that the quintessence and the hidden thing that is our stone is nothing other than our adhesive (because adherent to all forms), celestial and glorious soul, which, through our magisterium we extract from its mine (the body, or the human being), which alone produces it. It is not in our power to produce this water by means of any art, as Nature alone can generate it. This water is also the very strong vinegar which makes a pure spirit from the body of gold. I counsel you, my son, to despise all other things, for they are all vain except this water which burns, bleaches, dissolves, and freezes. It alone has the power to putrefy and to germinate . . .'<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Bibl. des phil. chim.*

<sup>7</sup> *Bibl. des phil. chim.*

As the whole alchemical work has Quicksilver as its means and point of departure, Sulphur and Quicksilver are sometimes called the 'double' masculine-feminine Mercury. When the nature of Sulphur achieves its development in Quicksilver, it is represented by the sign ☿. The lunar crescent is here replaced by the horns of the 'igneous' Ram (*Aries*) of the Zodiac. This is the 'igneous water' and the 'non-burning fire'.

As has already been mentioned, 'living gold' is generated by the perfect union of Sulphur and Quicksilver. From another point of view, however, each metal consists of three components, namely, Sulphur, Quicksilver, and Salt. 'Wherever there is metal', says Basilus Valentinus, 'there are Sulphur, Quicksilver, and Salt . . . spirit, soul and body.' Thus these three powers or principles together constitute the nature of metal – or of man. Salt is in a sense the static, and thus also the neutral, element of the ternary.

Transposed to man, salt is not simply the body in its outward and visible form; it is its psychic form, and as such has a twofold aspect: on the one hand, that of limitation, and on the other, that of a symbol.

Sulphur produces combustion, Quicksilver evaporation. Salt is the ash that remains over and serves to fix the 'volatile' spirit.

Not only in alchemy, but also in the various contemplative methods of East and West, purified bodily consciousness plays the role of a 'fixative' or support for a higher state of the spirit, which in its breadth and originality eludes all conceptual limitation. That the body, freed of the fevers of passion, can serve as the support for such a contemplative state, rests both on its relatively static character, which stands out like a solid pillar in the constantly flowing current of psychic appearances, and also on the

fact that, in contrast to the purely subjective contents of consciousness, it represents the so to say objective intersection between the human microcosm and the macrocosm. In a sense the body is the most clearly circumscribed, outward and simple of all reflections of the cosmos. The lowest corresponds to the highest, says the law enunciated in the 'Emerald Tablet'.

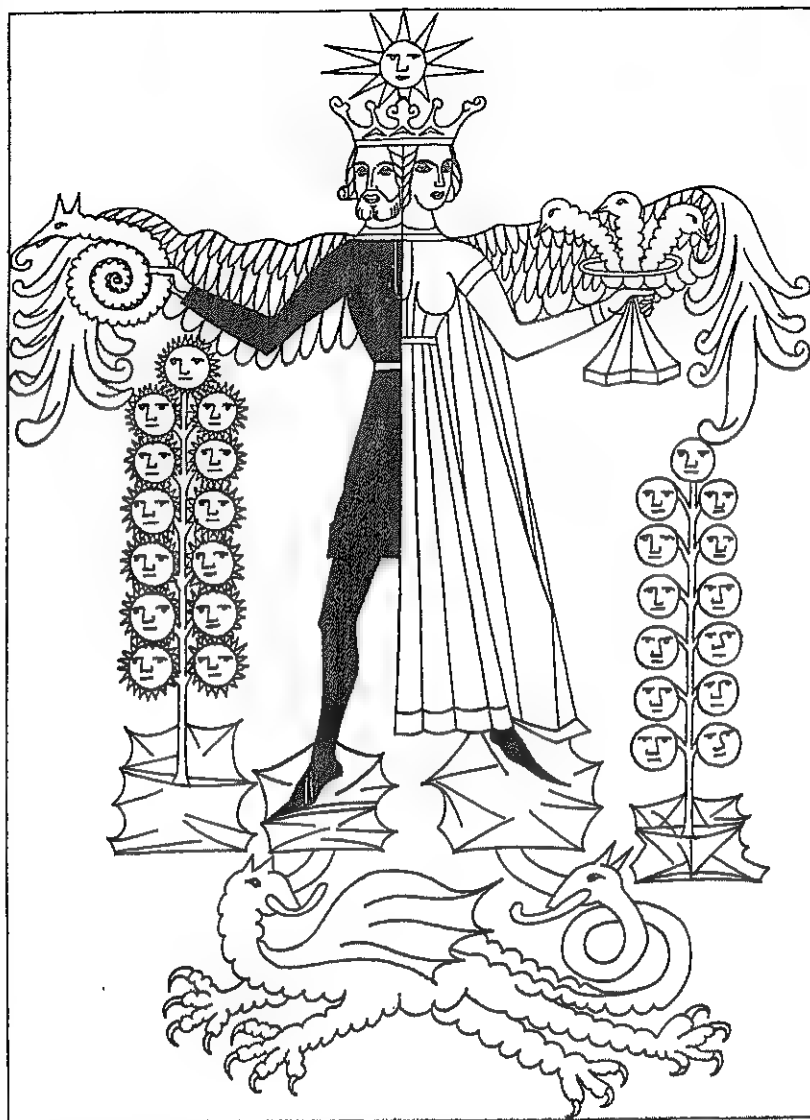
## CHAPTER I I

### OF THE 'CHEMICAL MARRIAGE'

The marriage of Sulphur and Quicksilver, Sun and Moon, King and Queen, is the central symbol of alchemy. It is only on the basis of the interpretation of this symbol that a distinction can be made between, on the one hand, alchemy and mysticism, and, on the other, between alchemy and psychology.

Speaking in general terms, mysticism's point of departure is that the soul has become alienated from God and turned towards the world. Consequently the soul must be reunited with God, and this it does by discovering in itself His immediate and all-illuminating presence. Alchemy, on the other hand, is based on the view that man, as a result of the loss of his original 'Adamic' state, is divided within himself. He regains his integral nature only when the two powers, whose discord has rendered him impotent, are again reconciled with one another. This inward, and now 'congenital', duality in human nature is moreover a consequence of its fall from God, just as Adam and Eve only became aware of their opposition after the Fall and were expelled into the current of generation and death. Inversely, the regaining of the integral nature of man (which alchemy expresses by the symbol of the masculine-feminine androgyne) is the prerequisite – or, from another point of view, the fruit – of union with God.

If the distance – and the relationship – between man and God is represented by a vertical line, then the distance between man and woman, or between the two corresponding powers of the soul, is represented by a horizontal line – which results in a figure like an inverted T. At the



*The Hermetic androgyne – king and queen at the same time – stands on the dragon of Nature, between the ‘tree of the sun’ and the ‘tree of the moon’. The androgyne has wings and carries in its right hand a coiled snake and in its left hand a cup with three snakes. Its male half is dressed in red, its female half in white. – From the manuscript of Michael Cochem (ca. 1530) in the Vadian Library, St Gallen.*

point where the two opposed forces are balanced, that is to say, at the centre of the horizontal line, the latter is touched by vertical axis, descending from God, or rising up to God. This corresponds to the supra-formal spirit, which unites the soul with God.

Although, following this image, the two forces or poles of human nature (the Sulphur and Quicksilver of the inward alchemical work) lie on the same level, there is nevertheless a difference of rank, similar to that of the right and left hands, so that the masculine pole can be said to be placed above the feminine. And indeed Sulphur, as the masculine pole, plays a role towards Quicksilver, the feminine pole, which is similar to that of the spirit in its action on the whole soul.

As all active knowledge belongs to the masculine side of the soul, and all passive being to its feminine side, thought-dominated (and therefore clearly delimited) consciousness can in a certain sense be ascribed to the masculine pole, while all involuntary powers and capacities connected with life as such, appear as an expression of the feminine pole. This would seem to resemble the distinction made in modern psychology between the conscious and the unconscious. There is therefore a temptation to interpret the ‘chemical marriage’ (the expression is that of Valentin Andrae) simply as an ‘integration’ of unconscious powers of the soul into the ego-consciousness, as is claimed by the so-called ‘depth psychology’.

In order to judge how far this interpretation is right, and to what extent it requires correction, it is necessary to recall the three-sided relationship that was represented above by an inverted T. True union of the two powers of the soul can only take place at that point where the supra-formal spirit, the Divine Ray, touches their common level. This means, however, that what man regards as



his own 'I' can never become the axis of a real 'integration', for, according to all spiritual traditions, the 'I' which modern psychology regards as the real kernel of 'personality', is precisely the barrier which prevents consciousness from being flooded by the light of Pure Spirit, or, in other words, which hides the Spirit from our consciousness. Thus the 'chemical marriage' is not an



*The marriage of king and queen, sun and moon, under the influence of spiritual Mercury. From the 'Philosophers' Rosegarden' by Arnaldus von Villanova, manuscript in the Vadiana Library, St Gallen.*

'individuation', at any rate not in the sense of an inward process by means of which the ego imprints on a wave of collective instincts its own particular form – a form necessarily limited, both temporally and qualitatively. It may well be that the influx of hitherto unconscious influences may widen the ego-consciousness, for this lies within the range of an ordinary sublimation in the psychological sense of the word. Nevertheless this has quite definite limitations, which are in fact those of ordinary ego-consciousness.

Human consciousness can only attain dominion over the undulating sea of the unconscious with the awakening of a creative power within it which derives from a higher sphere than that of ego-consciousness. This higher sphere is also unconscious, but only provisionally so, from the point of view of ordinary consciousness, for in itself it is pure undivided light. This light is inaccessible to psychological observation, both in its essence and in all its emanations, for psychology, like all empirical sciences, is subject to reason, acting on its own, and reason can no more penetrate beyond itself to its luminous source, than a mirror can throw light on the sun. It is thus quite vain to wish to describe psychologically the real essence of alchemy or the secret of the 'chemical marriage'. The more one strives to dispense with symbols and to replace them with scientific concepts of one sort or another, the more rapidly does that spiritual presence vanish which is the very heart of the matter, and which can only be transmitted by symbols, whose nature is conceptually inexhaustible.

In a sense, therefore, ego-consciousness lies between two unconscious realms, one below, which in its latent and as yet unformed nature can never become completely conscious, and one above, which only appears as uncon-

scious 'from below'. To the extent that the supra-conceptual light acts on the realm of the soul, the 'natural' power of the 'lower' consciousness is tamed and assimilated.

The alchemical process has thus a dual and ambiguous aspect, since the development of the two fundamental powers of the soul (masculine Sulphur and feminine Quicksilver), brought about by spiritual concentration, is able to reflect the non-conceptual Spirit to the extent that it includes the involuntary, and in this sense natural, realms. The reason for this is that Nature, in her non-conceptual and more or less unconscious or involuntary aspect, is the inverse image of the creative spirit, in accordance with the words of the 'Emerald Tablet', that whatever is above is like that which is below, and vice versa. Thus the fundamental masculine and feminine powers are anchored in the unconscious and instinctive nature of man. The two powers experience their full development on the plane of the soul, but realize their fulfilment only in the spirit, for only here does feminine receptivity attain its broadest breadth and its purest purity, and is wholly united to the victorious masculine Act.

The other way round it can be said that involuntary nature, rooted in the unconscious, only attains her living unity to the extent that the supra-conceptual Spirit acts on her. The ray of the Spirit acts on original nature like a magic word, nor does this apply merely to inward nature, the nature of the soul (shut off from the outward psychic 'atmosphere' not so much by the body as by the conceptual ego-bound consciousness): indeed the direct presence of the Spirit in man acts on the whole subtle or psychic ambiance, and through this penetrates, to a greater or lesser extent, into the corporeal ambiance also.

This explains, amongst other things, certain miracles which occur in the proximity of saints.

Let us return to our original symbol of an inverted T, and amplify it to a cross. The upper part of the vertical axis obviously indicates the origin of spiritual light. The lower part reaches down into the darkness of unconscious nature. The two horizontal arms 'measure' the development of the two polar powers of the soul, which alchemy calls Sulphur and Quicksilver. It can now be said that through the reconciliation or marriage of these two initially hostile forces, the opposition between 'above' and 'below' also disappears, to the extent, in fact, that the darkness is dispelled by light. If the two forces are represented by two serpents, winding themselves up the vertical axis of the cross, until at the level of the horizontal arms they finally meet and embrace one another in the centre, subsequently being transmuted into a single serpent fastened upright to the cross, then one has a picture of how 'dark' nature is transmuted into 'light' nature.

The marriage of the masculine and feminine forces finally merges into the marriage of Spirit and soul, and as the spirit is the 'Divine in the human' – as is written in the *Corpus Hermeticum* – this last union is related also to mystical marriage. Thus one state merges into another. The realization of the fullness of the soul leads to the abandonment of soul to spirit, and thus the alchemical symbols have a multiplicity of interpretations. Sun and Moon can represent the two powers in the soul (Sulphur and Quicksilver); at the same time they are the symbols of Spirit and soul.

Closely related to the symbolism of marriage is that of death. According to some representations of the 'chemical marriage' the king and queen, on marriage, are killed and

buried together, only to rise again rejuvenated. That this connection between marriage and death is in the nature of things, is indicated by the fact that, according to ancient experience, a marriage in a dream means a death, and a death in a dream means a marriage. This correspondence is explained by the fact that any given union presupposes an extinction of the earlier, still differentiated, state. In the marriage of man and woman, each gives up part of his or her independence, whereas, the other way round, death (which in the first instance is a separation) is followed by the union of the body with the earth and of the soul with its original essence.

On 'chemical marriage' Quicksilver takes unto itself Sulphur, and Sulphur, Quicksilver. Both forces 'die', as foes and lovers. Then the changing and reflective moon of the soul unites with the immutable sun of the spirit so that it is extinguished, and yet illumined, at one and the same time.

## THE ALCHEMY OF PRAYER

In so far as alchemy contains a science of Nature – the latter comprising both gross or corporeal and subtle or psychic manifestation – its laws and concepts can be freely transposed to the domains of the other traditional sciences, for example, to humoral medicine (which regards the human organism as an indivisible whole), and also to the corresponding science of the soul and its related therapeutics. More important to us in the present connection is the transposition of alchemical perspectives to mysticism, for it offers a parallel to what was said earlier regarding the 'chemical marriage'. Here only brief mention of this particular transposition will be made, by way of indication and amplification, without attempting to pursue all its ramifications.

Within the framework of mysticism, alchemy is above all the alchemy of prayer. By the word prayer is to be understood not so much an individual petition, but rather the inward – and sometimes also outward – pronouncing of a formula or name directed to God and evoking God, thus especially the so-called 'ejaculatory prayer'. The pre-excellence of this kind of prayer rests on the fact that the word or phrase repeated as a means of concentration is not one which has been selected by some human being or other, but either derives wholly from revelation or contains a Divine Name (if indeed it does not consist exclusively of this Name). Thus the word pronounced by the person praying is, thanks to its divine origin, a symbol of the eternal Word and, in the last analysis, in view of its content and power of benediction, is one with the latter: 'The foundation of this mystery (that is, the invocation of

a Divine Name) is, on the one hand, that "God and his Name are one" (Ramakrishna), and on the other, that God Himself pronounces His Name in Himself, hence in eternity and outside of all creation, so that his unique and uncreated word is the prototype of ejaculatory prayer, and even, in a less direct sense, of all prayer.' (Frithjof Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*.<sup>1</sup>)

Thus, fundamentally, the Divine Name or the sacred formula of ejaculatory prayer is related to the passive soul, as is the Divine Word, the *fiat lux*, to the passive nature or *materia prima* of the world. This brings us back to the correspondence (mentioned by Muhyi 'd-Din ibn 'Arabi) that exists between, on the one hand, the Divine Command (*al-amr*) and Nature (*tabi'ah*), and, on the other, Sulphur and Quicksilver, the two fundamental powers which in the soul are (respectively) relatively active and relatively passive. In its immediate sense, and from the point of view of 'method', Sulphur is the will, which unites itself with the content of the word pronounced in the prayer, and acts in a formative manner upon the Quicksilver of the receptive soul. In the last analysis, however, Sulphur is the penetrating spiritual light contained in the sacred words, like the fire in flint, and whose appearance effects the real transmutation of the soul.

This transmutation goes through the same phases as are determined by the alchemical work, for the soul initially becomes congealed on turning away from the outward world, then dissolves as a result of inner warmth, and finally, having been a changing, volatile stream of impressions, becomes a motionless crystal filled with light. – This is indeed the simplest expression to which this

<sup>1</sup> Published by John Murray, London, 1961. Chapter entitled 'Modes of Prayer'.

inward process can be reduced. If it were to be described in greater detail, it would be necessary to repeat almost everything that has been said in this book about the alchemical work, and to relate it to the inward action of prayer and within the framework of corresponding spiritual contemplation.<sup>2</sup>

It will suffice here to mention that the alchemy of prayer is treated particularly fully in the writings of the Islamic mystics.<sup>3</sup> Here it stands in close relation to the method of *dhikr*, an Arabic expression which can be translated as 'remembrance', 'recollection', and 'mention', and also as 'ejaculatory prayer'. 'Remembrance' is intended here in the sense of the Platonic *anamnesis*: 'The sufficient reason for the invocation of the (Divine) Name lies in its being the "remembering" of God; and this, in the last analysis, is consciousness of the Absolute. The Name actualizes this consciousness and, in the end, perpetuates it in the soul and fixes it in the heart, so that it penetrates the whole being and at the same time transmutes and absorbs it . . .' (Frithjof Schuon, op. cit.)

The basic law of this kind of inward alchemy is to be found in the Christian formula of the *Ave Maria*, the 'angelical salutation'. *Maria* corresponds both to *materia prima* and to the soul in its state of pure receptivity, whereas the words of the angel are like a prolongation of the divine *fiat lux*. The 'fruit of the Virgin's womb' corresponds to the miraculous elixir, the Philosophers' Stone, which is the goal of the inward work.

According to the medieval interpretation, the angel greets the Virgin *mutans Evae nomen*: *Ave* is indeed the reverse of *Eva*. This indicates the transmutation of the

<sup>2</sup> See Frithjof Schuon, op. cit., chapter 'Stations of Wisdom'.

<sup>3</sup> See my *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, pp. 101ff. Published by Ashraf, Lahore, 1959.

chaotic soul into the pure mirror of the Divine Word. To the objection that the angel did not speak Latin, and that *Eva* in Hebrew is *Khawwa*, it must be answered that in the domain of the sacred there is no chance, and also that things which seem mere coincidences are in reality preordained. This explains why in the Middle Ages the smallest details of Scripture, even the very names, were studied and variously interpreted according to their symbolism – and with an inspiration which rebuffs every reproach of artificiality.

## CHAPTER 13

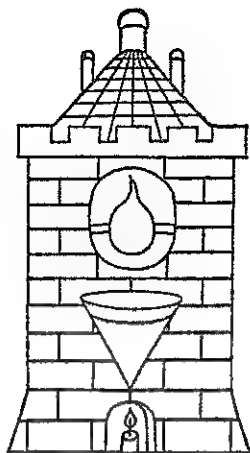
### THE ATHANOR

'Athamor', from the Arabic *at-tannûr* ('oven'), is the word used by the alchemists to designate the oven in which the elixir is prepared. In alchemical manuscripts it is usually portrayed in the form of a small tower surmounted by a dome. It contains the glass vessel (usually egg-shaped) which lies in a sand-bath or ash-pit situated immediately above the fire. All of this has both a literal and a symbolical meaning, for although it is certain that ovens of this shape were in fact used for all sorts of chemical and metallurgical operations, the real athamor – as far as the 'Great Work' was concerned – was none other than the human body, and thus also a simplified image of the cosmos.

That the oven of the alchemists is reminiscent of the human body has already been noted by other modern writers on alchemy.<sup>1</sup> It is misleading, however, to try to establish this likeness on an anatomical basis, as, from the 'methodic' viewpoint of alchemy, the 'body' does not mean the visible and tangible body, but a tissue of powers of the soul which have the body as their support, and which are accessible *via* bodily consciousness. When it is said that love dwells in the heart, this assumes a relationship between soul and body similar to the one which, in a much more subtly graduated manner, lies at the basis of the alchemical symbol of the athamor. In this, the threefold envelope (consisting of earthen oven, ash-pit, and glass vessel) refers to so many envelopes or 'levels' of bodily or vital consciousness.

The most important element in the oven is the fire. The

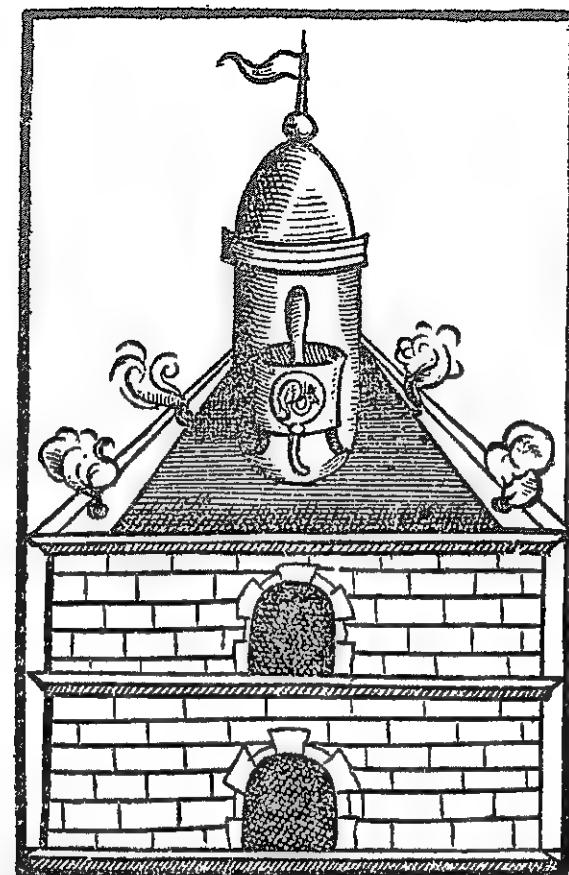
<sup>1</sup> See: H. K. Iranschär, *Enthüllung der Geheimnisse der wahren Alchemie*, Zurich.



*Athanor, from the 'Mutus Liber'.*

alchemists stress that the heat which transmutes the *materia* contained in the glass must be threefold, namely, the open heat of the fire, the evenly distributed heat of the ash- or sand-bath (in a trough of which the glass vessel lies like an egg in the nest), and finally the latent heat that is actualized in the substance itself, a heat which thereafter becomes active in its own right. (The latter is what would today be called – on a purely physical level – the heat of the chemical reaction.)

The fire clearly corresponds to the generative power, which is first aroused and then tamed in order to serve inward contemplation. From this it can at once be understood why the alchemists have always warned against a violent or unsteady fire. A violent flame might well consume the 'flowers of gold'. The indirect warmth of the ash-pit, on the other hand – which must be 'mild, enveloping, and penetrating' – signifies the concentration of the soul, which is indirectly brought about and maintained by the 'open' fire. Ash is burned living material which can no longer be set on fire – that is to say, which is no longer attainable by the passions. It is sometimes said that the ashes must be of oak wood. The oak is a symbol of



*Athanor, from the book by Basilus Valentinus: 'Concerning the Great Stone of the Ancients . . .' Leipzig M. DC. J ii.*

man, and especially of the human body. Finally, the warmth which develops in the enclosed *materia* and which according to the alchemists, is already present in all bodies and substances, and only has to be awakened, is a symbol of the most inward vital force.

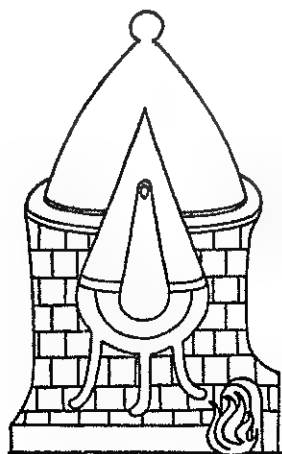
The alchemical masters also speak of three fires: an artificial, a natural, and an 'anti-natural'. These correspond to the distinction between methodic contemplation, the 'vibration' of the soul which is set in motion by the former, and the spontaneously occurring intervention of



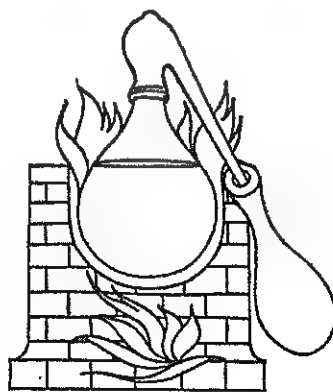
the Spirit, which is also described as an 'incombustible sulphur', and is a mode of grace.

The fire is invigorated both by a current of air which enters through the air holes in the oven, and by the use of bellows. This is an indication that, in spiritual concentration as practised by the alchemists, the regulation of the breath played a part, just as in *yoga*.

The fact that the hermetic vessel or 'egg' is made of glass or crystal and is thus transparent indicates its connection with the soul. It is none other than consciousness deflected from the outer world and turned inwards, thus constituting, so to say, an isolated sphere. During 'boiling' it must remain 'hermetically sealed'. The powers which are developed in it must not leak out, if the work is to succeed. Depending on the process which it is intended to serve, the Hermetic vessel can have various forms. It can be constricted in the middle like a cucurbit. It can have one or more bulbous protuberances. It can consist of a sinter-basin or, for the 'dry' method, of an open crucible. Each of these forms corresponds both to an artisanal use



*Athanor, from the Book of the Holy Trinity.*

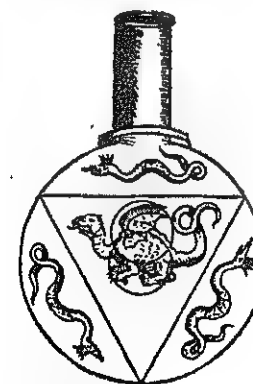


*Alembic with retort.*

and to a certain aspect of the spiritual work. The most general form of the vessel, however, is egg-shaped. The position of the vessel in the human body corresponds to the solar plexus.

The Hermetic egg is the microcosmic reflection of the 'world egg' (*hiranyagarbha*) of Hindu mythology, which represents the subtle 'germ' of the visible world. Like the world egg, the Hermetic egg contains synthetically all the elements and properties from which the corporeal world develops. This is why the progress of the alchemical work is compared with the creation of the world.

A unique counterpart to the alchemical oven is to be found in the sacred pipe of the North American Indians, which likewise represents the human body. Like the athanor, it is not so much a 'picture' of the body as a kind of paradigm of those vital powers and processes which link the body with the world of the soul and also with the whole cosmos. For the Indians the fire which burns in the oven or in the sacred pipe, is derived from the sun. The *materia*, however, which it consumes and transmutes



*The Hermetic vessel containing the three primordial forces sulphur, quicksilver and salt and the 'volatile' and 'solid' (or spiritual and corporeal) dragon of Nature. From Basilus Valentinus: 'Concerning the Great Stone of the Ancients . . .'*

into smoke, comes from everywhere, from all things and beings. Before filling the pipe, the Indian priest distributes the tobacco on the different elements of a geometrical image of the universe, a kind of wind-rose. Then he places it in the pipe, invoking all the various cosmic powers which these elements represent, so that, by the sacrifice of smoking, the whole world, and also the whole human soul, may be transmuted.<sup>2</sup> The rising of the smoke symbolizes the ascension of the individual soul to the Infinite, and thus corresponds to alchemical sublimation. When the Indian at prayer offers his pipe first to the heavens and then to the earth, this is analogous to the alchemical 'spiritualization of the body and incorporation of the spirit'. The fire in the sacred pipe is revived by the breath. The canal of the pipe corresponds to the spinal column or, more exactly, to the subtle canal which is the channel of the vital spirit.

In contradistinction to the Hermetic vessel, in which the *materia* only moves within a closed circuit, the bowl of the sacred pipe is open. The smoke escapes. But even in alchemy there is a process similar to this. According to the so-called 'dry' method the *materia* is exposed directly to the fire, and this method is the shortest, but also the most dangerous, way to mastery.

The sacred pipe of the Indians is the prototype and guarantee of the highest dignity of man, his capacity to reconcile heaven with earth. The same sense, although less obvious, is also present in the form of the athanor.

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The following considerations, which may appear to

<sup>2</sup> See *The Sacred Pipe* by Black Elk. Edited by Joseph Epes Brown, University of Oklahoma Press, 1953.

depart from our subject, may be helpful in clarifying the mutual relationship of spirit and body. First of all let us recall that in certain mental illnesses it is impossible to determine whether the cause is mental or physical. In such cases, in fact, the disturbances of equilibrium follow one another alternately. The mental illness results in poisons accumulating in the body, and these in turn confuse or paralyse the mind, without it being possible to know whether the initial cause should be sought in the mind or the body. – Certain illnesses doubtless arise from more fundamental causes. They are in a sense conditioned by the human type.

Similar up to a point are the psychic states produced by narcotics. Such states may have a spiritual content, but only under particular conditions, because a narcotic can do no more than induce an inward process, it cannot determine its quality. When, in certain cults, intoxicating drinks were used to promote extra-ordinary spiritual states, it was not the intoxicating drink as such that produced the state in question. Its role could only be preparatory. The 'qualitative' impetus had to come from a different realm.

Sexual maturity in man is not the real reason why he recognizes beauty in woman. And yet the absence of this maturity – as a result of a physical defect – may well mean that a beauty which in itself is independent of sexual attraction, will never penetrate the door of consciousness. Finally it must be said that even the activity of the brain, without which certain spiritual insights are unattainable, is dependent on the body. Contrariwise, it is also possible that unusual spiritual states, to which the mind as such has not adapted, may temporarily or permanently damage the brain. In this case – which is well known in all civilizations with a spiritual tradition – the content, so to say,

breaks its vessel, and this proves, in a negative sense, how great an importance attaches to the physical foundation of a spiritual art.

The natural interplay of spirit and body tempts the superficial observer towards materialism. Yet he who sees the true proportions of things will on the contrary attain to the insight that the two levels of reality correspond to one another as (spiritual) prototype and (bodily) reflection. The whole cosmos is constructed symbolically. The eye does not see because it is able in a certain manner to focus rays of light; it sees because, on the corporeal level, it reflects the spiritual eye; this is why it also has the same shape as the heavenly bodies. The ear hears, because it resembles cosmic space, in which the eternal Word resounds. The acoustic law, according to which it is formed, is but an expression of the same prototype. So also it is that the inward faculties work only by virtue of their symbolic consonance with higher realities. The

Plate 9 THE HERMETIC ANDROGYNE, *representing the union of the two, male-female primordial forces. The eagle corresponds to the perfect, harmoniously male-female quicksilver. The bat and hare represent here the subtle and the corporeal. From the manuscript Ph 172 in the Central Library, Zurich.*

Plates 10 and 11 THE FLOWER SPROUTING FROM THE ASHES, AND THE WHITE VIRGIN OF THE LUNAR ELIXIR. *Representation of two phases of the alchemical work from the anonymous late Gothic manuscript MS Sloane 256 P of the British Museum. – The Hermetic vessel here has almost the shape of a heart. It stands on the earth. The flower of the sages sprouts from three roots which correspond to the three principles sulphur, quicksilver and salt.*







memory would not be able to store up the impressions of things if it did not, on the plane of the soul, resemble the eternal permanency of the principal possibilities in the Divine Spirit. The imagination would be meaningless if it did not, in its own way, participate in the plastic capacity of *materia prima*, and words would have no meaning if the Spirit were not the Word of God.

It is thus inherent in the nature of a sacred art, which naturally proceeds in symbolical fashion, to draw the body into its works, and even to make it its 'methodic' basis. Ascetic contempt for the body applies only to the body as the seat of the passions, and not to the body as symbol.

Plate 12 THE GRAVESTONE OF THE ALCHEMIST NICOLAS FLAMEL (ca. 1330-1417) from the Church of St Jacques-la-Boucherie; now in the Cluny Museum in Paris.

In the upper panel is Christ with the globe of the world, between sun and moon, accompanied by the apostles Peter and Paul. In the lower panel is portrayed the decaying corpse of Flamel. The inscription runs: 'Feu Nicolas Flamel jadis escrivain a laissie par son testament a leuvre de ceste eglise certaines rentes et maisons quil avoit acquestes et achetees a son vivant pour faire certain service divin et distribucions dargent chascun an par aumosne touchans les quinze vins lostel dieu et autres eglises et hospitaux de paris Soit prie por les trespases.'

## THE STORY OF NICOLAS FLAMEL AND HIS WIFE PERRENELLE

By way of illustrating what has already been said, and as a preparation for what still remains to be said, a translation – with brief commentary – of the famous story of Nicolas Flamel and his wife Perrenelle is reproduced below. This story constitutes the first part of Flamel's own book *On the hieroglyphic figures which he had depicted in the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents in Paris*.<sup>1</sup>

Records and documents have been conserved concerning Flamel's life. He was born in Pontoise in 1330 and worked in Paris as a writer and notary public. His office was at first situated beside the charnel house of the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents and later near the Church of Saint-Jacques-la-Boucherie, where he himself was buried in 1417. His tomb is preserved in the Cluny museum.

Flamel's account is concerned principally with the *primus agens* of the alchemical work, about which Synesios says: 'Concerning the *primus agens* the philosophers have always spoken only in parables and symbols, so that their science might not be accessible to fools; for if that were to happen, all would be lost. It should be available only to patient souls and refined spirits, who have withdrawn themselves from the corruption of the world and have purified themselves from the slimy filth of avarice . . .'

Nicolas Flamel's own story begins as follows:

'During the time when, after the death of my parents, I earned my living by our art of writing – making inventories, preparing accounts, and calculating the expenses of guardians and their wards – I acquired for two florins

<sup>1</sup> *Bibl. des phil. chim.*

a very old, large, and finely gilded book. It was neither of paper nor of parchment as are other books, but seemed to me to be made of the smoothed-out bark of young trees. Its binding was of beaten copper and it was engraved with strange letters and figures – I think they were Greek letters or letters of some similar ancient language. At any rate I could not read them, but I know they were not Latin or Gallic letters, for I understand something of these. Inside, the pages of bark had been engraved very skilfully with an iron stylus and bore very beautiful and clear Latin letters which had been finely coloured. The book contained thrice-seven pages, for they were fastened together (in sections) in this way, and the seventh page was always without writing. On the first seventh page, instead of writing, there was a picture of a staff, around which two serpents were entwined. On the second seventh page there was a cross, on which was nailed a serpent. On the last seventh page was represented a desert, in the middle of which several beautiful fountains played, out of which serpents sprang in all directions . . .'

The thrice-seven pages of the book recall the three principal phases of the work – blackening, whitening, and reddening – and the seven planets or metals.

The staff around which two serpents are entwined is the staff of Hermes, with the two forces – Sulphur and Quicksilver – which govern the spiritual axis.

The crucified snake is the symbol of the fixation of volatile Quicksilver – the first 'incorporation' of the spirit. The fixation of Quicksilver corresponds to the subjugation of the ever-restless vital force, which dissipates itself in wishing and imagining. At the same time it represents the transmutation of time-dominated thought into a motionless and timeless consciousness. The cross on which the serpent is nailed signifies the body, not as flesh and



sensuality, but as image of the cosmic law, of the motionless cosmic axis.

The fountains springing forth in the middle of a desert or wilderness, from which serpents emerge, represent the state of regained spiritual originality. All three pictures are variants of the serpent symbol, which always represents the same power of the soul (or cosmic power): 'Nature' or *Shakti*.

'On the first page of the book was written in large golden capitals: ABRAHAM THE JEW, PRINCE, PRIEST, LEVITE, ASTROLOGER AND PHILOSOPHER. TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE, DISPERSED THROUGH GOD'S ANGER INTO GAUL, GREETINGS. D.I. The rest of the page was filled with terrible curses (in which the word MARANATHA frequently occurred) against anyone who might read this book, unless he be sacrificial priest or doctor of the Holy Law.

'The man who had sold me this book did not know its value – any more than I did when I acquired it. I think it must have been taken from the poor Jews, or perhaps it had been found somewhere in one of their erstwhile dwellings . . .'

Flamel is perhaps referring here to one of the expulsions of the Jews, which occurred several times at that epoch. That the book should be of Jewish origin is significant, in that the Jews were the natural link between the Christian and Islamic worlds. It is known that the renaissance of alchemy in Europe in the later Middle Ages arose from the influence of Islamic culture.

'On the second page the author consoled his people and counselled them to eschew all vice, especially idolatry, and to wait with meek patience until the Messiah should come and conquer all kings on earth and with his people rule eternally in majesty. Without doubt this was written by a very learned man.

'On the third and following pages he taught, in simple language, the transmutation of metals, in order to help his captive people to pay their taxes to the Roman emperor and to do other things that I will not mention. Alongside, he provided illustrations of the vessels, and gave details of the colours, and other matters, excepting always the *primus agens* of which he did not speak. Instead he painted this, with great skill, over the whole surface of the fourth and fifth pages; and though it was very clearly delineated and depicted, no one would have understood it who was not familiar with their tradition and had not studied thoroughly the books of the philosophers. The fourth and fifth pages were thus without writing, being completely filled with beautiful and skilfully executed miniatures.

'On the fourth page there was portrayed first of all a youth with wings on his heels and a staff in his hand – a caduceus entwined by two serpents – with which he touched the helmet on his head. It seemed to me he represented the pagan god Mercury. Toward him ran and flew a powerful old man, on whose head was an hour-glass, and who carried a sickle in his hands – like Death – with which, full of rage and fury, he tried to cut off the feet of Mercury . . .'

That Mercury or Quicksilver can be robbed of its volatility by Saturn-Chronos or time, as Flamel himself says later on, can have two different, and, in a certain sense, contrary interpretations, depending on whether time is actively used or merely endured, and whether the fixation of Quicksilver is seen as a slow death of its effective power or as a taming of the latter. The hour-glass on Saturn's head, however, seems to suggest that time is to be mastered actively, by means of a rhythm which will transmute it into an eternal now.

'On the other side of the fourth page was portrayed a beautiful flower growing on the top of a high mountain and shaken violently by the north wind. It had a blue stalk, white and red flowers, and leaves shining like the finest gold. Round about it the northern dragons and griffins nested . . .'

The colours of the flower represent the three main phases of the work and its two fruits, namely silver and gold. Here blue takes the place of black, in keeping with the nature of a flower, but with the same sense of darkness and night. The flower grows on the lonely mountain of essential Being, which is one with the world-mountain, round which the heavens circle, through which the polar axis runs, and round which glide the dragons of the cosmic powers.

'On the fifth page was a rose-bush in flower, in the middle of a beautiful garden and leaning on a hollow oak. At the foot of the rose-bush gushed forth a spring of very white water, which fell away in cascades into the distance, after passing through the hands of countless peoples, who dug in the earth to find the spring, but did not find it, since they were blind, with the exception of one alone, who weighed the water . . .'

The spring of Quicksilver gushes forth from the 'earth' of *materia prima*, at the roots of the flowering tree of the soul, which is protected by the hollow oak trunk of the body. The water of life flows everywhere, yet no one finds it but the sage, who weighs it. One might have expected that he would taste it, but the weighing of the water has here the same meaning as the capture of Mercury by the measure of time.

The alchemists also teach how to unite the individual elements or the various natural properties with one another, according to a definite relationship of their

'weights'. Jâbir ibn Hayyân calls this the art of the balance. And yet it may seem absurd to weigh elements, or even properties, such as hot, cold, moist, and dry. What is meant by alchemical 'weighing' can only be understood if one first transposes the outward, quantitative measure of weight into the inward, qualitative measure of time (i.e., rhythm). Alchemical weighing, which appears to refer to physical mass, is thus none other than the mastery of rhythm, by means of which the powers of the soul can be influenced. Rhythm plays an important rôle in all spiritual arts. In Arabic, the rhythm of a verse is known as its 'weight' (*wazn*).

'On the other side of the fifth page was a king with a large knife, who, by means of soldiers standing round him, caused a large number of young children to be killed, whose mothers wept at the feet of the merciless armed men, while the flowing blood was gathered by other soldiers and put in a large vessel in which the sun and moon from heaven came to bathe. It was because this illustration recalled the story of the innocent children killed by Herod, and because it was from this book that I learned the greater part of the art, that I had the hieroglyphic symbols of these secret sciences depicted in the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents. This is what appeared on the first five pages . . .'

As Flamel himself writes in the following pages, the blood of the sacrificed innocents signifies 'the mineral spirit contained in all metals, and especially in gold, silver, and quicksilver'. This is none other than the 'philosophic Quicksilver' which is the first manifestation of *materia prima*. Blood is the fundamental stuff of life. The holy innocents are like undefiled stirrings or out-breathings of the vital spirit which, before they can develop into ego-conscious wills, are sacrificed by the king, in order to fill

the vessel of the heart with their blood, so that sun and moon, spirit and soul, may bathe, be dissolved, and then united in it, and, having lost their old form, emerge from it rejuvenated.

'I shall not relate what is written in beautiful and clear Latin on all the other pages, for God would punish me for this, as I would be doing something worse than did he, of whom it is told, that he wished that all men on earth had a single head, so that he might cut it off with one stroke.

'As I now had this beautiful book by me, I did nothing else during day and night but study it: I thus understood very well all the processes which it described, but I did not know what was the material I must work on. This made me feel very sad and lonely and caused me to sigh incessantly. My wife Perrenelle, whom I loved like myself and whom I had married only recently, was greatly concerned about this, and asked me continually if she might not be able to release me from the concern which obviously weighed upon me. I could hide nothing from her, and told her everything, showing her the beautiful book, with which she fell in love just as much as I had done. Her greatest pleasure was to gaze on its beautiful covers, engravings, pictures, and representations, of which, however, she understood as little as did I. Nevertheless it was for me a great consolation to be able to speak to her about it, and to discuss what might be done in order to find the explanation of the signs.

'Finally I had all the figures on the fourth and fifth pages copied in my house as faithfully as possible, and I showed them to various scholars, who understood them no better than myself. I even explained to them that these figures had been taken from a book that taught the production of the philosophers' stone; but most of them made fun of me and the holy stone, with the exception of a certain

Master Anselm, a licentiate in medicine, who studied this art diligently. He was very eager to see my book, and did everything he could to get a sight of it. I assured him, however, that I did not possess it, but I described to him fully what it contained. He told me that the first picture represented time, which devours all things, and that, following the number of pages in the book, it would require six years in order to perfect the stone. After this period, he asserted, one would have to turn over the hour-glass, and boil no more. When I said to him that this picture was meant to represent only the *primus agens* (as was written in the book itself), he replied that each six-year boiling was like a *secundus agens*. The *primus agens*, he said, whose picture was before us, was without doubt none other than that white and heavy water – namely quicksilver – which could not be grasped, and whose feet could not be cut off, that is to say, whose volatility could not be removed except by long boiling in the pure blood of young children. In this blood quicksilver, uniting with gold and silver, would first of all be transmuted into a plant just like the one shown in the picture. Thereafter, through putrefaction, it would be changed into serpents, which, having been completely dried and cooked in the fire, would disintegrate into golden powder – and this was the philosophers' stone.

'It was the fault of this counsellor that, for the long period of twenty-one years, I committed thousands of mistakes, without, however, using blood, which would have been cruel and villainous. For I had discovered from my book that what the philosophers called blood was none other than the mineral spirit contained in metals, principally in the sun, moon, and Mercury, which I continually strove to combine. The above-mentioned interpretations, however, were more ingenious than exact. Since, in all my

activities, I never perceived the signs which, according to the book, should appear at a definite time, I had always to start again at the beginning. Finally, when I had lost all hope of ever understanding these figures, I made a vow to God and St James of Galicia, and decided to seek the explanation from some Jewish priest or other in one of the synagogues of Spain . . .'

St James the Elder, whose shrine is at Compostela, was the patron of alchemists, and also of all cosmological arts and sciences. It is certainly no coincidence that the pilgrim's staff (*bourdon*) of St James – a staff criss-crossed by two ribbons and crowned with a round knob, as can be seen in the saint's hand in the Romanesque statue at Compostela – bears a remarkable similarity to the staff of Hermes.

'I set forth, therefore, with the agreement of my wife Perrenelle, bearing on me a copy of these figures, in pilgrim's dress and with a pilgrim's staff, as I can be seen on the outside of the chapel in the cemetery where I had the hieroglyphic figures painted, and where also, on both side walls, I had a procession depicted, in which all colours of the stone are to be seen in order, appearing and disappearing, along with the French inscription: *Moult plaist à Dieu Procession, s'elle est faite en dévotion* ('A procession pleases God greatly, when it is accomplished with devotion'). This inscription repeats almost literally the beginning of the book of King Hercules,<sup>2</sup> which deals with the colours of the stone and bears the title *Iris: operis processio multum naturae placet*, etc. I chose these words deliberately, knowing that the wise would understand the allusion.

'In pilgrim's dress, then, I made my way, arriving finally at Montjoye, whence I proceeded to St James of Com-

<sup>2</sup> Herakleios I, Emperor of Byzantium (610-641).

postela, where with great devotion I discharged my vow. Having done this, I departed and met on the way, in León, a merchant from Boulogne who introduced me to a doctor of Jewish origin but of Christian faith – called Master Canches – who lived there and was renowned for his learning. When I showed him the figures copied from my book, he was overcome with astonishment and joy, and asked me at once whether I knew anything of the whereabouts of the book from which they were taken. I answered in Latin (in which language he had questioned me) and told him that, should someone solve these riddles for me, I hoped to obtain exact information concerning the book. At this he immediately began, with great zeal and joy, to explain the beginning to me. In short, he was happy to hear where the book was, and I to hear him speak about it. He must already have heard a lot about the book, but, as he told me, it had been thought to be completely lost. We decided, therefore, to set out together. From León we travelled to Oviedo, and from there to Sanson where we boarded a ship for France. Our journey proceeded happily, and well before we reached the latter kingdom, he had truly explained to me most of my figures, revealing even in mere points great secrets (which I found most wonderful). But when we arrived at Orléans, the learned man became very ill, developing the most severe vomiting which did not stop from the moment it began at sea. He was very afraid that I might leave him, which was quite understandable. Although I never left his side, he called for me unceasingly. Finally he died, at the end of the seventh day of his illness, which filled me with sadness. I had him buried, as well as I could, in the church of the Holy Cross in Orléans, where he rests to this day. God keep his soul, for he died a good Christian. If death does not prevent me, I will settle on that church

a small rent, so that every day a few masses may be said for his soul.

'Whoever would see how I arrived home and how Perrenelle rejoiced, let him look at us both in this city of Paris on the door of the chapel of Saint-Jacques de la Boucherie, on the side, and near my house. We are depicted there offering prayers of thanksgiving, I at the feet of St James of Compostela, and Perrenelle at the feet of St John, whom she had so often invoked. Thus, through God's grace and the intercession of the Blessed Virgin and Saints James and John, I had learned what I had wished to, namely, the first principles, though not their initial preparation, which is harder than anything in the world. This, however, I finally learned after making many mistakes over a period of about five years, during which I continually studied and worked – as one may see me on the outer wall of the chapel (on whose pillars I had the processions painted) at the feet of Saints James and John, ceaselessly praying to God, with my rosary in my hand, reading attentively in a book, meditating on the words of the philosophers, and thereafter accomplishing the various operations which I had divined from their words. 'Finally I found what I had longed for, and I recognized it at once by its strong smell; and when I had it, I accomplished the work (*magistère*). Having learned the preparation of the first powers (*agens*), I had only to follow my book word for word, and could not have gone wrong even had I wanted to. The first time I made the projection, I applied it to quicksilver, and transmuted about one and a half pounds of it into pure silver, which was better than that from the mine – a fact which I tested and had tested several times. This took place on the 17th January 1382, a Monday, towards midday, in my house, in the presence of Perrenelle alone. Later, following

my book word for word, I accomplished the work with the red stone on a similar quantity of quicksilver, again in the sole company of Perrenelle, in the same house, on the 25th day of April of the same year, at five o'clock in the evening, when I truly transmuted the quicksilver into almost the same amount of gold, which was clearly better than ordinary gold, in that it was softer and more malleable. This I can say in truth. In this way I accomplished the work three times with the help of Perrenelle, who understood it just as well as I did myself, as she helped me in carrying out the instructions; and had she wished to accomplish it entirely on her own, she would certainly have reached the goal. I possessed more than enough, after I had accomplished it once, but I found a very great joy in seeing and beholding the wonderful works of nature in the vessels . . .'

Man and woman, who in natural fashion incarnate the two poles of the alchemical work (Sulphur and Quicksilver), can by their mutual love – when this is spiritually heightened and interiorized – develop that cosmic power, or power of the soul, which operates the alchemical dissolution and coagulation (*solve et coagula*).

## THE STAGES OF THE WORK

There are various ways of subdividing the multiple stages of the alchemical work. Each of these is something of a schematic simplification of the total process; nevertheless each of them is right, in the sense that each one is an expression of the inner logic of the 'work'. The oldest subdivision is the one which designates the individual stages or phases by different colours. This possibly goes back to a particular metallurgical process, such as the purification and colouring of metals. According to this scheme, 'blackening' (*melanosis*, *nigredo*) of the *materia* or 'stone' is followed by bleaching (*leukosis*, *albedo*), and this, in turn, is followed by 'reddening' (*iosis*, *rubedo*).

Black is the absence of colour and light. White is purity; it is undivided light – light not broken down into colours. Red is the epitome of colour, its zenith and its point of greatest intensity. This ordering of things becomes even more evident if, between white and red, a whole series of intermediate colours, such as lemon-yellow, yellow-ochre, and bright red, is inserted, or again, if one speaks of a 'peacock's tail' of gradually unfolding colours. In this case royal purple is always the seal of each series.

It is to be noticed that the three principal colours, black, white, and red (which are also to be found in Hermetically influenced heraldry) designate in Hindu cosmology the three fundamental tendencies (*gunas*) of the primordial *materia* (*Prakriti*). Here black is the symbolically 'downward' movement (*tamas*), which flees the luminous Origin; white is the 'upward' aspiration towards the Origin, towards the Light (*sattva*); and red is the tendency towards

expansion on the plane of manifestation itself (*rajas*). With these interpretations in mind, one may be surprised to find that in alchemy it is not white, but red, that represents the final result of the work. According to the Hindu doctrine the cosmos is so constructed that firstly *tamas*, the downward-striving force, throws down the anchor into darkness, then *rajas*, expanding in breadth, develops multiplicity, and finally *sattva*, like an upward-striving luminous flame, brings everything back to the Origin. The mere comparison of the three alchemical colourings with Hindu cosmology is already a clear indication of the point of view of alchemy and the precise limits of its symbolism. After the 'spiritualization of the body' – which in a certain sense corresponds to bleaching, and supersedes the initial blackness or corruption, comes, as the completion, the 'embodying of the spirit' with its royal purple-red colour. The same rhythm can also be transposed to other modes of spiritual realization. The significant point here is that the emphasis lies on the manifestation of the Spirit and not on the transcending – or the extinction – of limit-bound existence.

By means of putrefaction, fermentation, and trituration – all of which take place in darkness – the *materia* is divested of its initial form. By means of bleaching to a silvery white it is purified, and by 'reddening' it is coloured anew – and here colour stands for form. The purifying power is Quicksilver, the 'colouring' power, Sulphur.

The threefold division according to colours does not conflict with the twofold division into 'lesser' and 'greater' works. This reflects the already described duality of *materia* and *forma*, soul and spirit, moon and sun.

Both the threefold and the twofold divisions occur in the sevenfold division based on the reigns (*régimes*) of the planets and properties of the metals.



There are two principal conceptions of the sevenfold gradation. In one of these, the 'lesser' and the 'greater' works are combined – something in fact practicable – so that silver and gold, moon and sun, as a pair, represent the end-point of the whole series, while the other planets or metals take their place in the series according to their nobility, that is to say, their greater or lesser relationship with gold, or the sun. This order corresponds to the hierarchy of planetary houses, as described in chapter 5. Its model is the ascent of the sun from its lowest position in the house of Saturn, the original winter solstice, to its domain in the house of Leo, which once represented the summer solstice. In the other conception, the 'lesser' work, with the moon as end-point, precedes the 'greater' work, the crowning-point of which is the sun. This latter conception, mentioned by Philaletes, Bernardus Trevisanus, Basilius Valentinus, and other alchemists – and which because of its particularly lucid form, will now be examined in greater detail – appears as follows:

☿	♄	♃	♌	♀	♂	☼
Mercury	Saturn	Jupiter	Moon	Venus	Mars	Sun
quicksilver	lead	tin	silver	copper	iron	gold

The sign of Mercury, which comes before all the others, does not represent a stage in the work, but is rather a key to the whole, so that the work in itself has only six phases. Of these the first three are expressed by purely lunar and the last three by purely solar signs. Only the sign for Mercury or quicksilver is androgynous, formed of both sun and moon.

It has already been said that for the alchemists quicksilver is the *primus agens*, the true means of the work, the all-dissolving water and nourishment for the spiritual embryo. It is, so to say, the most direct manifestation of

*materia prima*, seen as the fine, psychic stuff, or vital breath, which unites the individual body-soul organism with the cosmic sea of life. In it the germ of spiritual gold lies hidden, as does gold in ordinary quicksilver.

Transposed to the 'operative' mode of mysticism, what appears at this point is the spiritual influence, grace, or other mode of operation of the Holy Spirit, which in a certain sense penetrates the apparently closed world of ego-consciousness from without, and dissolves it out of its metallic 'coagulation'. In alchemy, Quicksilver could be regarded as the 'cosmic blessing', which, as Fra Marcantonio says, 'constantly falls from Heaven as a fine mist to fill the pores of the earth'<sup>1</sup>; here 'pores' are what save solid bodies from fossilization and suffocation; it is through them that the earth 'breathes', just as man lives by remaining open to the celestial influences present in nature.

The interpretation of the sign of Mercury as the key to the whole work is confirmed by the role of the God Mercury or Hermes in the Orphic mysteries. The messenger of the gods accompanied the soul after its death – bodily or mystical – through all the realms of the world of shadows, to its final place of rest.

♄ The first stage of the 'lesser work', which comes under the sign of Saturn, corresponds to 'blackening', 'putrefaction', and 'mortification'. It was represented by a raven, a skull, or, sometimes, by a grave. Basilius Valentinus says of this phase of the work: 'All flesh, born of the earth, will be destroyed and given to the earth again, just as it has already been earth. Then the earthly salt will bring forth a new birth by means of the breath of heavenly life. For wherever earth is absent at the beginning, there can be no rebirth in our work. For the

<sup>1</sup> See chapter 10, 'Sulphur, Quicksilver, and Salt', p. 139

earth is the balm of nature and the salt of those who seek knowledge of all things.<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of every spiritual realization stands death, in the form of 'dying to the world'. Consciousness must be withdrawn from the senses and turned inward. As the 'inner light' has not yet risen, this turning away from the outward world is experienced as a *nox profunda*. To this state Christian mysticism applies the parable of the grain of wheat, which must remain alone in the earth and die, if it is to bring forth fruit. In many initiatic rites this death of the soul is expressed by a symbolical burial, and certain Christian orders observe a similar custom at the investiture of monks.

In the pre-Christian mysteries the death of the mystic was often brought into relationship with the sacrificial death of a god. Like the god, who was killed and dismembered, the mystic gave back his limbs and faculties to nature. The powers of the underworld divided among themselves the elements of the empirical soul not belonging to the immortal essence, and in certain cases this dismemberment was carried out in effigy. The mystic must himself experience the sacrificial death of the god, so as to realize to the full that the god, who was apparently dismembered in the world (in order to confer his life on its multiplicity), did not in truth perish in it, but remained immortal, timeless, and indivisible. Thus man can only know his immutable essence when he has renounced all that in him is perishable. This includes not only the flesh, but also the 'soul' immersed in sensory experience.

At the beginning of the work the most precious material which the alchemist produces is the ash, which remains over after the calcining (*calcinatio*) of the base metal. By means of this ash, which has been divested of all passive

<sup>2</sup> *Of the great stone of the ancient sages*, Strasbourg, 1645.

'humidity', he will be able to capture the volatile 'spirit'. The first stage of the work corresponds to the mythological meaning of Saturn in that Saturn-Chronos, who devours his own children, is the divinity who, through time and death, causes 'that which becomes' to return to its formless origin.

2 The second stage of the 'lesser work' is dominated by Jupiter, whose sign exhibits the lunar crescent joined to the horizontal bar of the cross, whereas in the case of Saturn the same crescent is placed below the downward-pointing arm: ♄. Under the influence of Jupiter, therefore, the soul has raised herself out of the earth to which she had returned and out of the night of initial chaos, in order to develop her power. In the language of the Hindu doctrine of the fundamental tendencies of *materia* (the *gunas*), it might be said that the soul's power (Quicksilver) had been freed from *tamas* and united to *rajas*. *Rajas*, however, has the meaning of expansion and development, which in the present case means that the subtle power has been dissolved out of its coagulation in bodily consciousness and having been earth, so to say, now becomes water and air. This corresponds to sublimation.

Morienus says: 'Whoever knows how to purify and bleach the soul, and allow her to rise upwards, guards the body well and has freed it from all darkness, blackness, and evil odour . . . He will then be able to bring back the soul into his body, and at the hour of their reunification, great wonders will occur . . .'

) With the third stage, dominated by the moon, the colour white is completed. The lunar crescent has raised itself above the cross of the elements or cosmic tendencies and has dissolved their oppositions. All the potentialities of the soul contained in the initial chaos have now been fully developed and have united with one another in a

state of undivided purity. This is the outermost limit of 'solution', and it is followed by a new 'coagulation'. From the Christian point of view, this state of the soul corresponds symbolically to the Blessed Virgin, in her readiness to receive the Divine Word, and in this connection it is significant, that the Virgin has often been portrayed enthroned above a crescent.

In his book *The Forgotten Word*<sup>3</sup> Bernardus Trevisanus writes about this completion of the 'lesser work': 'I tell you, with God as my witness, that this Quicksilver, when it was sublimated, was clothed in so pure a white, that it looked like the snow on top of a very high mountain. It had a fine, crystalline lustre, from which, when the vessel was opened, there emanated a perfume so sweet that nothing resembling it could be found on earth. I, however, who speak to you, know well, that this wonderful brightness appeared before my own eyes, that I touched the fine crystalline nature with my own hands, and that with my own sense of smell, I perceived the wonderful sweetness. I wept with joy and astonishment at so great a wonder. May the eternal, high and glorious God be praised, for He has hidden so many wonderful gifts in the secrets of nature, and has allowed some men to see them. I know that when you know the causes of this disposition, you will ask: What kind of nature can that be which, coming from a corruptible thing, nevertheless contains in itself a wholly celestial thing? No one can relate all the wonders. Perhaps, however, there will come a time when I can tell you a number of special things about this nature, which the Lord has not yet allowed me to communicate in writing. Be that as it may, when you have sublimated this Quicksilver, take it, fresh and young, along with its blood, so that it does not become old, and give it to its

<sup>3</sup> *La Parole délaissée* in *Le Voile d'Isis*, Paris, volume for 1931, p. 461.

parents, the sun and the moon, so that out of these three things – sun, moon, and quicksilver – our mixture may be produced . . .'

It should be clear from the planetary signs, that the three stages of the 'lesser work' correspond to an ascending movement, for at first the moon was under the cross, then attached to its horizontal axis, and finally it reigned alone: In contradistinction, the following three stages of the 'greater work', describe a descending movement: ♀ ☿ ☉, for here the sun first appears over the cross, then sinks under the cross, while finally it stands alone, bringing everything back to the centre.

The first three stages correspond to the 'spiritualization of the body', the last three to the 'embodying of the spirit', or the 'fixation of the volatile'. Whereas the 'lesser work' has as its goal the regaining of the original purity and receptivity of the soul, the goal of the 'greater work' is the illumination of the soul by the revelation of the Spirit within it. This sequence of six stages can be transposed to all kinds of spiritual realization, but nevertheless it remains no more than a schema, for neither of the two movements (the ascent of the soul, the descent of the spirit) can be entirely separated from the other. The development of a flower is the work of the sun, even though the sun only begins to have its true and full effect when the flower is mature enough to open itself to the sun's rays.

♀ The fourth stage – the first of the 'greater work' – is dominated by Venus. In her sign the sun of gold and the spirit, the incombustible sulphur, appears above the tree of the cross. The sun swallows up the moon, and its form-giving power imprints anew the cross of the elements. 'At the beginning', says the *Turba Philosophorum*,<sup>4</sup> 'woman

<sup>4</sup> *Bibl. des phil. chim.*

is on top of man, and at the end man is on top of woman.' At first the 'volatile' power of feminine Quicksilver prevails over the solid bodies, whose form is manifested in passive mode by Sulphur. Later, however, the fixative power of Sulphur prevails over volatile Quicksilver, and effects a new, and this time active, crystallization of the soul-body form.

This 'new creation', however, is not yet perfect, for the spiritual sun, as it appears here, is still attached to the cross of the elements, and this is why the alchemists say of copper, the metal of Venus, that in it the colouring power of Sulphur (the essence of gold) does indeed become visible, but remains unstable and coarse because of the opposition contained within the four elements.

☿ The fifth stage – the second of the 'greater work' – is dominated by Mars. In the sign of Mars (the reasons for writing it in this way have already been explained) the sun takes up a similar position to that of the moon in the sign of Saturn. The meanings of the two signs, Saturn and Mars, are, however, opposite to one another, though both in fact represent a kind of death and extinction; but under the 'sway' of Mars there is no question of a chaotic condition; on the contrary, there is here an active descent of the Spirit into the lowest levels of human consciousness, so that the body itself is completely penetrated by the 'incombustible sulphur'. Just as in iron, the metal of Mars, the fixative power of sulphur, though wholly present, cannot yet completely manifest its lustre, so at this stage of the work the Spirit appears submerged in the body and as if extinguished in it. This is the 'outermost' coagulation, and the threshold of the final completion – the transformation of the body into Spirit-become-form.

The highest meaning contained in the sign of Mars – one which extends far beyond alchemy itself – is the 'incarna-

tion of the Divine Word'. In a certain sense this implies a certain humiliation of the Divine, in that, as Light, it appears in the darkness of the world. Alchemical realization, however, can only be a distant reflection of this incarnation.

Artephius writes: '. . . The two natures change one another reciprocally, the body "incorporating" the spirit, and the spirit transmuting the body into a coloured (i.e., qualitative) and white (i.e., pure) spirit . . . Boil it (i.e., the body) in our white water, that is, in Quicksilver, until it has been dissolved in blackness. On boiling for a very long time, it will eventually lose this blackness, and finally the dissolved body will arise along with the white soul, the one mingled with the other. They will embrace in such a way that never again will they be separable one from another. Then indeed will the Spirit unite with the body in perfect harmony, so that together they become an immutable thing. This is the dissolution of the body and the fixation of the Spirit, both processes constituting one and the same work.'<sup>5</sup>

☉ The completion of the 'great work' is expressed by the sign of the sun. This is distinguished from the solar disc as a constituent part of the other planetary signs by having its central point represented. Thus, what was only principally and potentially present in the earlier stages is here manifest. In the completed form, which in itself remains finite, the infinite content is visibly-invisibly present.

The same sign also recalls the kernel in the fruit, and the embryo in the womb. This is in accord with the genetic symbolism of alchemy.

This phase of the work is also the completion of the red colour, of which Nicolas Flamel, in his elucidation of the

<sup>5</sup> *Bibl. des phil. chim.*

'hieroglyphic figures', writes: 'On a dark violet field, a purple-red man holds the foot of a scarlet red lion, which has wings and appears to be carrying off the man. The dark violet field means that the stone, by means of thorough boiling, has received beautiful orange and red garments, and that its complete digestion (indicated by the colour orange) has divested it of its earlier orange clothing. The scarlet red colour of the flying lion, which resembles the pure and clear scarlet of pomegranate seeds, indicates that this colour is now genuinely and harmoniously completed. It is like a lion which devours all the purely metallic nature and transmutes it into its own substance, namely, into true and pure gold, finer than that from the best mines.

'Because of this the colour in question has the power to remove man from this vale of sorrow, that is to say, from the evil of poverty and sickness, by raising him up with its own wings from the foul waters of Egypt (the ordinary thoughts of mortals), so that he will despise worldly life with its riches, and think day and night of God and His saints, desiring the Empyrean and thirsting after the sweet springs of eternal hope.

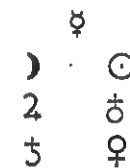
'God be praised eternally for giving us the grace of seeing this beautiful and wholly perfect purple colour, this beautiful colour of the poppy of the fields and rocks, this Tyrian,<sup>6</sup> sparkling and flaming colour, incapable of any alteration or change, over which even heaven and the zodiac have no power or might, and whose radiant and blinding splendour seems in a sense to communicate to man something super-celestial, by astonishing, frightening, and overawing him, when he looks at it . . .'<sup>7</sup>

In a text by Basilus Valentinus there is a representation of

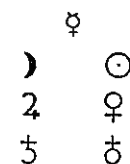
<sup>6</sup> Purple was produced in Tyre.

<sup>7</sup> *Bibl. des phil. chim.*

the male-female androgyne which symbolizes the completion of the alchemical work, with the signs of the seven planets in such an order that the three solar signs correspond to the masculine side of the androgyne, and the three lunar signs to the feminine side, while the androgynous sign of Mercury represents the 'keystone' between the two series. This gives rise to the following scheme, in which the stages of the 'lesser' and 'greater' works will again be recognized:



In a certain respect (and quite apart from the astrological meanings of the same signs) the signs on the right may be called active, and those on the left passive, since the 'lesser work' achieves the readiness or preparedness of the soul, and the 'greater work' the spiritual revelation. However, to be able to recognize that the individual signs correspond to one another in pairs, it is necessary to remember that the order of each series (as described up to now) is in the opposite direction to that of the other, since the one depends on the ascent of the moon and the other on the descent of the sun (these two movements occurring in the course of the work). When, on the contrary, both movements are viewed in parallel, the signs will be ordered as follows:



From this it is clearly to be seen that for every active

aspect there is a corresponding passive aspect. Saturn represents a passive 'abasement', Mars an active 'descent'. The first sign expresses the extinction of the ego-bound soul, the second the victory of the Spirit. On the next level, Jupiter corresponds to a development of the soul's receptivity, while Venus corresponds to the rising of the inward sun. The moon and the sun themselves embody

the two poles in their pure state, and Mercury bears both essences within itself.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> To see how these six stages constantly recur as fundamental stages in every manner of spiritual realization, one should consult *Stations of Wisdom* by Frithjof Schuon, especially the final chapter bearing the same title. (John Murray, London, 1961.)



*Representation of bi-sexual Mercury ('Rebis' = res bis) from Basilius Valentinus' 'Aurelia Occulta Philosophorum' in 'Theatrum Chemicum', Argentorati, 1613, vol. IV. — The Hermetic androgyne stands on the dragon of Nature, which lies on the winged sphere of materia prima. The compass and setsquare in the hands of the androgyne correspond to heaven and earth, to the male and female powers. On the male side are Venus, Mars and the sun, and on the female side are Saturn, Jupiter and the moon. At the top is perfect Mercury. Right and left are reversed in this picture.*



## THE EMERALD TABLET

The meaning and structure of the alchemical work are summarized in the 'Emerald Tablet' (*Tabula Smaragdina*). This presents itself as a revelation of Hermes Trismegistos, and was accepted as such by the medieval alchemists. The earliest mention of it is to be found in an eighth-century text by Jâbir ibn Hayyân, and a Latin translation was already known to St Albert the Great. From its style, however, it is clearly of pre-Islamic origin, and as it is wholly in accord with the spirit of the Hermetic tradition – as the alchemists unanimously agree – there is no convincing reason to doubt its connection with the origins of Hermetism. This leaves open the question as to whether the name Hermes stood for a man or for a priestly-prophetic function stemming from Hermes-Thoth.

A translation of the 'Emerald Tablet', from the Latin version, is given below. For the clarification of certain points, reference is also made to the Arabic version<sup>1</sup>:

'1. In truth certainly and without doubt, whatever is below is like that which is above, and whatever is above is like that which is below, to accomplish the miracles of one thing.

'2. Just as all things proceed from One alone by meditation on One alone, so also they are born from this one thing by adaptation.

'3. Its father is the sun and its mother is the moon. The wind has borne it in its body. Its nurse is the earth.

'4. It is the father of every miraculous work in the whole world.

'5. Its power is perfect if it is converted into earth.

<sup>1</sup> See J. F. Ruska, *Tabula Smaragdina*, Heidelberg, 1926.

'6. Separate the earth from the fire and the subtle from the gross, softly and with great prudence.

'7. It rises from earth to heaven and comes down again from heaven to earth, and thus acquires the power of the realities above and the realities below. In this way you will acquire the glory of the whole world, and all darkness will leave you.

'8. This is the power of all powers, for it conquers everything subtle and penetrates everything solid.

'9. Thus the little world is created according to the prototype of the great world.

'10. From this and in this way, marvellous applications are made.

'11. For this reason I am called Hermes Trismegistos, for I possess the three parts of wisdom of the whole world.

'12. Perfect is what I have said of the work of the sun.'



'1. In truth, certainly and without doubt, whatever is below is like that which is above, and whatever is above is like that which is below.'

In the Latin version the beginning is as follows: *Verum, sine mendacio, certum et verissimum*, but Jâbir's rendering 'In truth, certainly and without doubt' (*haqqân, yaqînân, lâ shakka fih*) is clearer, for the words 'In truth' refer to the objective source of the revelation, while the words 'certainly and without doubt' refer to its subjective reflection in man. The next sentence (the main part of the first clause) has a slightly different wording in the Arabic version, and appears to give a different meaning: 'The highest comes from the lowest, and the lowest from the highest.' This refers to the reciprocal dependence of the active and the passive, in the sense that the essential form cannot be manifested without passive *materia*, just

as, the other way round, passive potentiality can only reach development under the influence of the active pole. Likewise, in the 'greater work' the efficacy of the spiritual power depends on the preparedness of the human 'container' and vice versa. All this, however, is but one further example of the 'mirror-correspondence' of 'above' and 'below', as the Latin text expresses it. – 'To accomplish the miracles of one thing', that is, of the inward work. 'Above' and 'below' are thus related to this one thing and complement one another in its regard.

'2. Just as all things proceed from One alone by meditation on One alone, so also they are born from this one thing by adaptation.' This means that the Hermetic work proceeds from a single substance, following the pattern (and as the inverse, 'substantial' image) of the emanation of the world from the One Divine Being, by means of the One Spirit.

Instead of *meditatione unius* ('by meditation on one alone') some manuscripts have *mediatione unius* ('by the mediation of the one'). This does not essentially alter the sense, for what is meant here is that the undivided, invisible Light of the unconditioned One is refracted into multiplicity by the prism of the Spirit. Plotinus teaches that the Spirit (*nous*) constantly contemplates the Supreme Unity, without ever being able to comprehend or penetrate it fully, and that by this continuous contemplation, it manifests the 'many-sided' All, just as a lens transmits the light it receives as a bundle of rays. The Arabic expression *tadbîr*, which in some versions appears at this point, has the double meaning of 'consideration' and 'exposition' or 'deduction'. Instead of *adaptatione* ('by adaptation') Basilios Valentinus says *conjunctione* ('by combination').

'3. Its father is the sun and its mother is the moon.' The sun as father of the 'Stone' is the spirit (*nous*), while the

moon is the soul (*psyche*). – 'The wind has borne it in its body': The wind, which carries the spiritual germ in its body, is the vital breath, and, more generally, the 'subtle stuff' of the intermediate world that extends between heaven and earth – that is, between the supra-formal (or purely spiritual) world and the corporeal world. The vital breath is also Quicksilver, which contains the germ of gold in a liquid state – 'Its nurse is the earth' that is to say, the body, as an inward reality.

'4. It is the father of every miraculous work in the whole world.' 'Miraculous work' is the approximate translation of *thelesma*, from which 'talisman' is derived. A talisman (Arabic: *tilism*) is, strictly speaking, a symbol into which something of the power of its prototype has entered, the symbol having been fashioned in a particular cosmic situation (constellation) and with a corresponding spiritual concentration. A theurgic action of this sort is based on the qualitative correspondence between visible form and invisible prototype, and also on the possibility of making this correspondence effective by means of a sort of 'condensation', on the subtle plane, of a spiritual state. This explains the similarity between the talisman, as the bearer of an invisible influence, and the alchemical elixir, as the 'ferment' of metallic transformation.

'5. Its power is perfect if it is converted into earth.' That is to say, when the Spirit is 'embodied', the volatile becomes fixed.

'6. Separate the earth from the fire and the subtle from the gross, softly and with great prudence.' The separation of earth from fire and of the subtle from the gross means the 'extraction' of the soul from the body.

'7. It rises from earth to heaven and comes down again from heaven to earth, and thus acquires the power of the realities above and the realities below.' – The 'dissolution'

of consciousness from all formal 'coagulations' is followed by the 'crystallization' of the Spirit, so that active and passive are perfectly united. Thus the light of the Spirit becomes constant. – 'In this way you will acquire the glory of the whole world', namely, by your union with the Spirit which is the source of all light. – 'And all darkness will leave you': This means that ignorance, deception, uncertainty, doubt and foolishness will be removed from consciousness.

'8. This is the power of all powers, for it conquers everything subtle and penetrates everything solid.' – The subtle or the volatile (Arabic: *latif*) can only be conquered by uniting it with the solid or corporeal, just as one can only hold fast a mood of the soul by means of a concrete picture. Alchemical fixation is nevertheless more inward, and is related to what was said above about the role of bodily consciousness as the support of spiritual states. Through its union with the spirit bodily consciousness itself becomes a fine and penetrating power which can even have an effect outwardly.

About this Jâbir writes: 'When the body in its state of solidity and hardness has been so altered that it has become fine and light, it becomes as it were a spiritual thing, which penetrates bodies, although it retains its own nature, which makes it resistant to fire. At this moment it mingles with the spirit, since it has become fine and loose, and its effect on the spirit is to make it constant. The fixation of the spirit in this body follows the first process, and both are transformed, each one taking on the nature of the other. The body becomes a spirit, and takes on from the spirit fineness, lightness, extensibility, coloration, and all other of the spirit's properties. The spirit, for its part, becomes a body and acquires the latter's resistance to fire, immobility, and duration. From both elements a

light substance is born, which possesses neither the solidity of bodies nor the fineness of spirits, but, precisely, takes up a middle position between the two extremes . . .'<sup>2</sup>

'9. Thus the little world is created according to the prototype of the great world.' – In the Latin version this clause runs 'Thus is the world created.' The Arabic text, followed here, is obviously more complete. The 'little world', perfect image of the 'great world', is man, when he has realized his original nature, which was 'made in the image of God'.

'10. From this and in this way, marvellous applications are made.' – In the Arabic text this is: 'This way is traversed by the sages.'

'11. For this reason I am called Hermes Trismegistos, for I possess the three parts of wisdom of the whole world.' – Trismegistos means 'thrice-great' or 'thrice-powerful'. The 'three parts of wisdom' correspond to the three great 'divisions' of the universe, namely, the spiritual, psychic, and corporeal realms, whose symbols are heaven, air, and earth.

'12. Perfect (or complete) is what I have said of the work of the sun.' – *De operatione solis*: 'of the work of the sun'; but this can also mean: 'of the work of gold' or 'of the production of gold'.

The whole contents of the Emerald Tablet are like an explanation of the Seal of Solomon, whose two triangles respectively represent essence and substance, *forma* and *materia*, spirit and soul, Sulphur and Quicksilver, the volatile and the stable, or spiritual power and bodily existence:



<sup>2</sup> See Paul Kraus, *Jâbir ibn Hayyân*, Cairo, 1942–1943.

## CONCLUSION

It is my hope that the foregoing exposition may serve to rescue the spiritual horizon proper to alchemy – the ‘royal art’ – from the misleading simplifications inevitably attendant upon a purely historical approach. Just as objects in space appear smaller the farther away they are, so whatever is distant in time appears to us reduced and simplified in form – and the greater the spiritual gap between one age and another, the more is this so. Between our age and the age to which alchemy belongs, the gap is almost incommensurably wide. It is thus not surprising if the modern researcher, without any knowledge of the spiritual arts that in certain cultures are practised to this very day, should see alchemy as if through the wrong end of a telescope. He lacks, as a rule, not only the ‘doctrinal’ background which would enable him to understand the symbolic language of the alchemists, but more importantly he lacks the possibility of any practical comparison which would make clear to him what, in this domain, is possible and probable.

Nature – that is, the bodily and psychic nature of man and things – may be approached from many angles, and, this being so, each of the ‘dimensions’ corresponding to a given point of view, is both logically and practically quite inexhaustible. Thus, for example, modern empirical chemistry can be extended indefinitely, without its discoveries ever once departing from that particular ontological dimension, which is determined by its premisses. On the other hand, a traditional science, such as alchemy, can consider and deal with the same natural data (with no less logic) from a completely different – but likewise inexhaustible – point of

view. An example of this is the traditional medicine of the Chinese, Indians, or Tibetans, the methods of which are quite foreign to modern conceptions of nature, but which are not, for this reason, less efficacious.

Modern science has an inexorable eye for the ‘childish’ errors which exist ‘on the margin’ of traditional cosmology – but which have no serious consequences. What it will not see however (but what the eyes of a spiritual art such as alchemy see as overwhelmingly significant) are its own infringements – quite unforeseeable in their consequences – against the equilibrium of man and nature, not to speak of the wholly unjustifiable claim to totality, and the far-reaching and indeed almost absolute repudiation of the suprasensible and the incorporeal, which characterize modern science.

The relationship of man to his natural environment varies not only theoretically, but also practically, and not only subjectively, but also from the point of view of the environment itself. The physical world is not cut off from the psychic, even though the particular perspective of the ego causes the psychic sphere of the individual being to appear as something entirely separate and on its own. In epochs and cultures where ego-consciousness is less ‘coagulated’ and the relation to the natural environment is not dominated by the prejudices of a purely rationalistic outlook, it can happen more easily that the powers of the soul exert an influence directly and without mechanical intervention on the external world. This is especially true of traditions of ‘archaic’ form for which occurrences such as lightning, rain, wind, and growth are essential symbols. Here it can occur that particular sacred actions provoke an outward, cosmic echo. This may still be observed today among certain shamanistic peoples, such as the North American Indians.

We must situate alchemy in such settings as these, which are its original and fitting 'home', in order to do justice to certain sayings about the effect of the elixir, not all of which are to be taken merely in a higher, non-literal sense. The transmutation of base metals into gold is certainly not the true goal of alchemy, nor can it ever be achieved when it is sought after entirely for its own sake. Nevertheless there is evidence in favour of the visible achievement of the magisterium, which cannot simply be brushed aside with a wave of the hand. The metallurgical symbolism is so organically linked with the inward work of alchemy, that in rare cases that which was realized inwardly also occurred on the outward plane – not as the result of any chemical operation, but as a spontaneous outward concomitant of an extra-ordinary spiritual state. The occurrence of spiritual transmutation is already a miracle, and is certainly no smaller a miracle than the sudden production of gold from a base metal.

The Japanese archer initiated into the mysteries of Zen may hit the target blindfold, given inner concentration and inward union with the timeless essence at the moment of the shot.<sup>1</sup> In the same way the physical transmutation of metals was a sign which manifested outwardly the inward holiness both of gold and of man – of the man, that is, who had completed the inward work.

<sup>1</sup> See Eugen Herrigel (Bungaku Hakushi), *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1953.

## CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF HERMETIC AND MYSTICAL AUTHORS QUOTED

- Hermes Trismegistos: date uncertain, pre-Christian
- Plotinus: 203–269
- Synesius (or Synesios): fourth century
- Herakleios I (Heraclius), Byzantine Emperor: 640–641
- Khalid: end of seventh century
- Morienus: end of seventh century
- Jâbir Ibn Hayyân: eighth century
- ar-Razi, Abu Bekr: 826–925
- Senior Zadith (*Turba Philosophorum*): probably ninth century
- Artephius: date unknown, Medieval
- Su Tung-P'o: circa 1110
- Muhyi 'd-Din Ibn 'Arabî: 1165–1240
- St. Albert the Great (Albertus Magnus): 1193–1280
- Dante Alighieri: 1265–1321
- 'Abd al-Karîm al-Jîlî: born 1366
- Po Yu-shuan: thirteenth century
- Abul-Qâsim al-Irâqî: thirteenth century
- Geber: probably thirteenth century
- Ruysbroek, Jan van: 1294–1381
- Nicolas Flamel: 1330–1417
- Bernardus Trevisanus: 1406–1490
- Basilius Valentinus: end of fifteenth century
- Denis Zachaire: beginning of sixteenth century
- William Shakespeare: 1564–1616
- Jakob Boehme: 1575–1624
- Johann Valentin Andreae: 1586–1654
- Fra Marcantonio: date unknown
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